THE CITY OF SUNSHINE

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THE CITY OF SUNSHINE

A NOVEL

BY

ALEXANDER ALLARDYCE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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THE CITY OF SUNSHINE.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MADRI, THE DAINA.

In a ravine opening into the Gungaputra, cut off by thick jungle from the *ghats* of Dhupnagar, and dividing the village lands from those of the Milkiganj cottagers, lived Madri, the *daina*, or witch of the district. There are many witches in the Gungaputra valley, but, by her malignity and cunning, Madri had raised herself to a bad eminence, to which no other of the sisterhood had the tact to attain, and her evil fame had been spread far and wide as the Witch of the Gungaputra. Madri had only to go outside her own hut after nightfall, and shake loose her long black hair, to bring all the witches in Bengal, from the Naf to the Karumnassa, trooping round about her. So at least said the folks of Dhupnagar; and there was the beaten, green circle in front of Madri's door, where their unholy gambols were carried on, to substantiate the villagers' statements. Then for an evil eye—it was well known that Madri's glance brought certain destruction to either man or beast. It was notorious that Jye Kishen, the younger brother of Gangooly, the village headman, had met Madri one morning while he was setting out on a journey to Calcutta, and had turned back, fearing for the consequences of so inauspicious a rencontre. But who can evade his destiny? Going to a feast at Dwarkanath the schoolmaster's, the young man partook over freely of *ghi* and sweetmeats, which brought on an attack of indigestion, followed by obstruction of the bowels; and with the assistance of Nitye, the *kobiraj*, or quack doctor, young Jye Kishen was borne to the burning-ghat within eight-and-forty hours of his meeting with Madri. With a puff of her breath she could raise such a hurricane in the valley as would shake all the fruit-trees, and level every standing stalk of grain from Bhutpore to Ghatghar; and she had only to wag her little finger to send murrain upon both cow and bullock. When a cow became prematurely dry, the ryot assured himself that Madri had need of milk, and made no more about it. When a child began to ail, it was of course Madri's doing, and her hostility must be bought off at any price. It was in vain that the husbandman placed the *chattur*, or consecrated cake of cow-dung, on the top of his heap of winnowed corn. The rats at Madri's bidding would eat more than half of the grain in a night's time. Equally vain was it to seek to fight Madri with her own weapons. When Ram Churn, Shama Churn the grain-dealer's nephew, became possessed—of course it was Madri who had bewitched him—the afflicted parents had unwisely sent for Raghoo, the *khokasa,* or warlock, who lived apart from men, among the jungles of Panch Pahar, and commissioned him to expel the evil spirit. The upshot was that, after Raghoo began his incantation and fumigations to drive out the fiend, the youth became worse than ever, and died in a day or two raving mad; and after that, there was no sorcerer in the district who would enter the lists against Madri. Nor was the witch of the Gungaputra limited to the use of the human form. Gangooly, the headman, whose veracity no one in Dhupnagar would dare to dispute—openly at least—had encountered her in the shape of a spotted leopard one night near the Pagoda Tope as he was riding home from Gapshapganj; and when he exclaimed aloud, "If I survive till to-morrow I shall send that excellent lady, Madri—may she live for a thousand years!—a basket of the finest sweetmeats to be had in Dhupnagar." The beast, instead of springing upon him, gave him a friendly wag of its tail, and disappeared among the ruins of the old temple.

Madri's residence was well suited to her avocation. Close by the mouth of the ravine, where her hut stood, was the burning-ghat, where the funeral rites of the low-caste people of Dhupnagar were performed—a place which no respectable Brahmin ever passed without an expression of disgust. *Rakshasas* (ghouls), and all manner of unclean and evil spirits, hovered about the spot after dusk to pick up the souls of poor outcastes, and to torment the wretched naked spirits before they could find a refuge in some other body, whether human or brute. Through the thick jungle-wood Madri could see the death-fires at night from the door of her hut; her solitude was cheered by the shrill wailing of the mourners, and her senses were enlivened by the rank odours of the funeral-pile. Fronting her dwelling, on the other side of the ravine, was a deep precipice, almost concealed by creepers, at the foot of which more than one dead body had been found, and which generally was the first place to be searched when any of the villagers was amissing. Suicide was Gangooly's invariable report upon these occasions, for no one would venture to make too minute an inquest upon an accident happening so close to the witch's dwelling.

Let us peep into this abode of dread. It is a low, gloomy room, scarcely lighted up by an earthen lamp, which flickers and sputters in a hole of the wall. The charred cinders of a few sticks are lying in the middle of the room, from which a fitful glare of flame now and then flashes up, succeeded by a thick volume of smoke, which curls about the roof and eaves of the cottage until an outlet is found by the half-open window. Of course Madri would not burn dried cow-dung, as other Hindoos do, for her friends and familiars could hardly be expected to abide the odours of so holy a substance.

There was neither chair nor table, nor any sign of Madri's professional pursuits visible ; only a small shrine, gaudy with scarlet cloth and silver filigree work, stood against the wall of the hut, supporting, upon a crystal stand, a small, round, black stone. This was the *shalgram*, a stone possessed of divine properties, and powerful in all the appliances of magic ; and it is the ætites, or eagle-stone of the geologists, a stone found in almost every Hindoo household. But there were no marvels to attract the credulous, nothing horrible to unnerve the timorous, nothing mysterious to impose upon the sceptical.

But a single glance at the witch herself, as she stood in the middle of the floor, looking dreamily down upon the dying embers, was sufficient to convince one that such affectations could well be dispensed with. Madri was a tall, muscular woman, far above the average height of Bengal females, with a figure that was commanding and handsome, and a large well-formed head that sat proudly upon a stately neck and finely-squared shoulders. Her face had once been beautiful, and would have been so still but for the lines which vice and passion had traced upon it. It was as if evil had wrought a veil to spread over features which spoke of the goodness of nature—a veil which, though it could not wholly conceal the outward manifestations of a better mind, could still render them wholly inoperative. Her brow, though broad and lofty, had become moulded into a perpetual frown; her clear grey eyes were quick and piercing and fierce withal, her nostrils and upper lip were writhed into a scornful sneer, and the mouth revealed a set of large teeth clenched firmly together. None could tell her age; she might not be much over forty, but her skin was as dry and wrinkled, and her hair as grizzled, as any crone of threescore and ten years. She wore a long robe of coarse black serge, girt lightly round the middle; her arms were bare; and her hair hung loosely down to her waist in thick matted tresses, those tresses the shaking of which could strike awe into the hardiest heart in Bengal. One look into her face is enough to remove our wonder at the power for evil which Madri has made herself in the Gungaputra district.

Madri raises herself from her meditative attitude and looks towards the door of the hut. "The night waxes late and yet the girl comes not," she soliloquised; "what can detain the silly hussy? Charming herself with amulets and toys against the *mantras* (incantations) of Madri? Ah, well, let her; spell for spell, and the strong heart against the weak one. One needs no conjuring to read a mind like hers—all simplicity, purity, and innocent trust. And yet I am so unused to these qualities, that I had wellnigh mistaken them for guilty shame. Poor thing! hers is a sad story, and I could have melted at it, but that I saw she shuddered when I laid my hand upon her. That shudder, I suspect, saved my credit, for I should have lived to rue it had I taken such a simple chitterling into my confidence. And that old soldier will be here too—also very unlike the usual run of Madri's customers; but his errand was quite in my way. A handsome young gallant his son. I remember when I met him in the Ghatghar bridle-path where there is only room for one. He pulled his horse to the side and said, 'I should crave a kiss for my courtesy, my good mother, but that you are somewhat eldern; but never mind, the first pretty girl I meet shall requite me for your debt.' Ah! I have seen the day when he had not passed Madri in such a fashion; but alas! after the bloom comes the dry bark and the withered foliage."

"Here they are, love and death," continued she, taking two vials from her bosom and holding them between her and the light; "love and death, peace and trouble. If folks were not such fools, I know which they would choose. The one a long peaceful sleep from which there is no awakening, and no to-morrow of toil and misery to come after it—a heavenly repose; the other a short fitful dream of bliss, which we find on awakening to have been all a vision, and to have fled beyond recall to the world where visions dwell. In this hand I hold the death of the young Muhammadan; in this, the—well, what shall I call it?—a fit of colic to the young Hindoo. Poor thing! his maiden bride will call it a love-philtre, and will watch as anxiously for its operation as a girl waits for the first visit of her future bridegroom. The learned pundits say that nothing can take place but by the appointment of the gods. Eh, is that so? Suppose Madri's vials change hands; and now the Hindoo will die and the Muhammadan live; and every time that the vials change their places, the chances of life and death are changing to two men. Let the gods overrule these, and I'll thank them. But I must not confound the two, or I shall be making a blunder in earnest."

A rustling was now heard at the door of the hut, and Madri hastily replaced the vials in her bosom, muttering as she did so, "The poison is on the left, I am sure; the philtre to the right. It is the Hindoo girl; she fears to enter, but Madri is not the woman to tell her to take courage."

And crossing her arms upon her bosom, Madri began to chant some unintelligible doggerel in a low unmusical voice, which sometimes rose to the pitch of a strident screech, swaying at the same moment her body backwards and forwards in accompaniment to her strain. The rustling at the door continued, followed by a tremulous tap, but still Madri went on with her song, apparently unconscious that there was any one watching. Poor Chakwi, after peeping once or twice into the hut, and as often withdrawing her head in terror, was at last driven by sheer necessity to enter, and she came trembling in and made a humble obeisance to the sorceress. But Madri made no response, and the scared girl was obliged to stand cowering and shivering in a corner until the witch was pleased to notice her presence. In her terror Chakwi leaned herself against the wall for support, but started back instantly as if she feared to contract some terrible contagion. Madri marked and enjoyed all these symptoms as clear tokens of her superiority over other mortals; and it was not until her visitor had all but shrunk into the earth, that the witch's song grew fainter and fainter, dying away at last in a shrill prolonged wail, the discordance of which made Chakwi collect her wavering senses and draw herself up in an agony of horror.

"So you are come," said Madri, turning a stern glance upon the girl, and speaking in solemn, hollow tones; "and time too. Think ye that those of the air can bide for your behests? What have you brought me to-night to repay all the trouble that I have taken on your account?"

"Only this, good mother," faltered Chakwi, as she handed the witch a purse containing fifty rupees. "I know it is too little, and I would willingly give more if I had it; but, trust me, I shall not forget your kind assistance."

"Those who proffer gratitude before it is due, never pay when the bond is presented," said Madri, with a sneer. "And have you no ornaments about you, no charms or trinkets that have been blessed by a Brahmin? for there are those about us who will not brook such toys. If you have any, I advise you, as you value your life, to put them off your person before we proceed to do what must be done."

Chakwi began to tremble violently, and would have fallen, had not Madri supported her with a strong arm. The poor girl shuddered as the witch touched her, at which Madri's eyes began to glare fiercely, and her teeth to grind. "Off with your jewels, girl, or take the consequences!" cried the witch, shaking her roughly. "I may not fool away the precious night in stilling your fears. By the waters of the Gungaputra, but your husband was right to sleep with his back to such a simpleton."

Roused by this taunt, Chakwi plucked off her bracelets and her earrings, the string of Lanka (Ceylon) pearls that Ramanath had given her as her last birthday gift, and the fillet of gold thread and precious stones which confined her hair, and handed them to the sorceress. Madri took them contemptuously, as if they had been the brass bangles of a herdwoman, and going to the door, flung them, as she said, away.

"You will find them a few paces from the door when you go out, if no demon has been beforehand with you," she replied, in answer to Chakwi's look of fearful inquiry; but Chakwi made up her mind that if ever she got outside the hut alive, she would not tarry to search for her ornaments. Another fit of trembling fell upon her as Madri let go her arm and blew out the light.

"She will faint," muttered the witch, "and I shall be in straits what to do with her. I must brisken her up;" and going towards a recess in the wall, Madri took from it a long-necked bottle which had a suspicious look of having once borne the label "Exshaw No. 1." Pouring some liquor into a brass goblet, she held it to Chakwi's lips and imperatively ordered the girl to drink.

"But I know not what it is," pleaded Chakwi; "and I may not take drink from your hands for fear of my caste. Forgive me, mother, if I anger you; but I dare do nothing that would offend my religion, for my soul's sake."

"Soul's sake!" echoed Madri. "Do you talk to me of your soul? Drink, girl, or give up all hopes of your husband's love. This is the true drink of the gods, and, like the sacred food at the temple of Jagannath, it knows no distinctions of caste. Drink, I tell you; it will do you good." Chakwi put the vessel to her lips, and the witch forced her to swallow several mouthfuls. Instantly a strange lightness came over her mind, and she felt her courage begin to revive; and it was not much wonder, for the witch's bottle was filled with the strongest *arrack* (rum) from the Sudder distillery at Bhutpore.

"Now," said the witch, "stand aside, and when I give the word, shut your eyes and stretch out your hands, and something will be placed in them; but, if you love your life, speak not!"

And striking up a shrill recitativo, the witch shook her locks and began to sway her body to and fro. Strange flashes of fire began to pass before Chakwi's eyes, and dreadful shapes—"if shapes they might be called that shape had none"—came hovering about her. She shut her eyes firmly, but then she only saw the apparitions still more vividly—saw Madri standing in the centre of a circle of fire with her locks all aflame, and sparks issuing from her mouth; while round her danced thousands of demons, some with wings, some with tails, all gibbering and grinning and making faces at Chakwi. Meanwhile Madri's notes rose higher and higher, until they seemed to Chakwi to be caught up by a choir of the infernal imps and re-echoed from every corner of the hut. It was of no use for Chakwi to thrust her fingers in her ears; she seemed to hear the hellish melody through every pore of her body. All at once, while shrieking forth at the highest pitch of her voice, Madri seemed to pause, listen for an instant, and then made a full stop.

"Now," thought Chakwi, "comes the terrible moment. But, O Krishna, my husband! I would dare all the powers of darkness to earn thy affection."

The girl boldly stretched out her hand, but the witch caught her tightly by the elbow and dragged her aside.

"We are interrupted," said Madri, in a hoarse whisper, as she led the girl into another apartment cut off by a rude partition of bamboos from the main room;

"stay here until I call you again. Put your fingers in your ears, and for the life of you, daughter, make no noise."

Chakwi was pushed into a seat and left sitting in breathless agitation. The fumes of the spirits had mounted to her head, and she thought, with a confidence and familiarity that were perfectly appalling to herself, of the terrible sights by which she was surrounded and the ghastly neighbours that were crowding about her. She sat and shuddered, but curiosity triumphed over all her terrors, and she did not shut her ears, as Mạdri had ordered, but listened eagerly to hear what was going on.

"Well, have you got what I wanted?" asked a stern voice speaking in Bengalee with an up-country accent. "Here is the sum I promised you, and your silence shall be requited with as much every year so long as I live."

"A brief annuity, my father," responded the sarcastic tones of the witch; "for I see the death-film more than half over your eyes already."

"The briefer the better," replied the first speaker, with a deep-drawn sigh. "When life outlasts happiness, the sting of death has departed. I would it were my duty to take, instead of give, thy nostrums."

"And wherefore not?" taunted Madri. "I promise you shall find them effectual. Four-and-twenty hours after, the pains of age will have ceased to wrack you;

the troubles of this world, the ingratitude of friends, the disobedience of children, will no longer be able to raise the slightest pang in your bosom. Give me as many rupees again, and you shall have another potion for yourself."

"I am an old soldier, and may not stir from my post until I am relieved," answered the other, with a groan. "And now the medicine, for I cannot tarry longer in this place.

"The medicine, Sahib," responded Madri; "good! but there are those with us who have no earthly bodies, and whose wants must be spoken by my mouth. Give me money for them, for they love money as the best means of doing evil. More money, Sahib, and you shall have the medicine; refuse, and you excite the endless enmity of those nameless ones."

"I commend myself to the Prophet," replied the voice; "think not, woman, that thy foul fiends can have power over a humble, though erring, son of Islam. There is money—take it, and let me be gone."

"And for whom do you design this draught?" said the witch, sinking her voice into a hissing whisper. "For shame, old man! to put forth your hand upon the son of your heart. Nay, think not to deceive Madri, who knows what is both behind and before. Stifle your foolish pride, and leave the young head to grow grey in God's own time. If the young man has erred, there are other powers to punish, and you were never set to judge your own offspring. Begone in time, for it is long since Madri gave good advice before, and the words blister her tongue."

"Woman! devil! tempt me not!" groaned the man; "be quick with the medicine. Would you abet a rebellious heart? Is it not enough to have my own feelings to overcome that you must do your best to unnerve me? But my dependence is upon Allah. Quick with the stuff, sorceress!"

"Nay, then, take your choice," was Madri's reply, in a sullen tone. "Which of these you will. Either is sufficient to fulfil the course of Fate, and the wisest of us all must yield to his decrees."

"You have my thanks," responded the other, in a firmer tone. "Be silent about this, woman—silent as a stone image—and you shall be no loser by keeping the counsel of Shamsuddeen Khan."

With a blessing, that sounded like a curse in the ears of the horrified listener, Madri dismissed her visitor, and the next minute she had groped her way to where Chakwi was crouching, and dragged the girl into the larger room.

"And what did you hear?" she asked, shaking the girl roughly. "Of course you heard; you are too much of a woman to stop your ears as I commanded. Heard you Patchnamaworsanatrava, the king of the demon one-eyed Rotnagoratanparmandkas, whose dwelling is deep in the bowels of the earth, millions of cubits below the foundations of the Panch Pahar hills? What did he seem to you to be saying?"

"I cannot tell, good mother. I was too frightened to listen. My head swims, and I cannot stay longer. Indeed, indeed, I must go."

"Whatever you heard you must speedily forget, for the demon king's words have a sound which misleads other mortals, entirely different from the sense which they have to me. And you would have something to turn your husband's love towards you, poor thing?"

"Yes, good mother, and I beseech you to give it to me quickly. I will reward your kindness again; I swear it by the holy Linga of Dhupnagar. But let me —pray let me be gone; what should I do if they missed me from the house?"

"Peace, little coward! Madri has cast a deep sleep upon them all; none will witness your return. But you must come again, and let me know how the charm works. A stronger one may perhaps be necessary; for it is not so easy to secure the love of a husband as that of a paramour."

"But it will do no harm, will it?" asked Chakwi, suspiciously, as the witch placed a small vial in her hand; "it will not make him sick or heart-sore, good mother?"

"No more harm than a chew of betel," said Madri, contemptuously. "Pour the liquid into drinking-water, and be sure that no one else tastes it, if you would not have somebody else turned in the head about your beauty. I suppose you would not be sorry at that, would you?"

"Nay, good mother, but I am a true wife," said Chakwi, drawing herself up with a blush. "And now have I your leave to depart, and your protection?"

"Go in peace, my daughter, and be not long in returning," said Madri; "and linger not about the cottage lest some fiend should fall in with you," added she, as she remembered the ornaments.

But Chakwi did not need this injunction; for, clasping the precious vial to her bosom, she bounded from the cottage door, and disappeared in the jungle with the swiftness of an antelope.

Madri went out, and carefully picked up Chakwi's trinkets and brought them into the hut. "Pretty gewgaws," she said, as she concealed them with her other treasures; "and there was once a day when they would have shown to more advantage on Madri's person than on that plain little hen. No wonder though her husband dislikes her; and she has no more tact to snare a man's heart than she has to call down a star from the sky. I wonder when that marriage with Kristo's daughter is going to take place! I must learn something about it. There is that waiting-woman, Sukheena, the widow, whom I saved from shame. She will be able to give me the news. I wonder which bottle the old man took! Well, I gave the young man another chance, and he was a handsome youth, and spoke civilly to Madri. And as for the other; bah! he sneered at my power, and tried to make the villagers believe that I was an impostor. However, Hindoo or

Mussulman, it is all one to me. And yet I shall not be sorry if the young soldier is saved; and I can find a more amorous lover to console Chakwi's widowhood. Well, fate is fate, and those who live longest shall see most wonders. I have made a good day's work, and may now afford some comfort;" and bolting the door of her hut, Madri went and took her spirit-bottle from the recess, and with it on one side and her hookha on the other, she squatted down among the ashes, prepared to enjoy herself after the manner of mundane existences.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BREACH OF PROMISE IN BENGAL.

One morning all Dhupnagar woke up in a hubbub of astonishment; and from the temple to Rutton Pal's there was nothing but amazement and dismay. The men congregated about corners, talking in low voices, and with lengthened visages. The women crowded about the steps of the tanks, or loitered on their way home with the breakfast-water, chattering like flocks of noisy parrots. Even the little children had suspended their sports that they might whisper to each other the serious news. The marriage between Krishna, the priest's son, and Kristo Baboo's daughter, was broken off. Some said the breach had arisen with the Gossains; others were confident that Kristo himself had discarded the young suitor; a third party had reason to believe that the damsel had rebelled against the match;—but all were unaminous that the marriage was not to take place. There would be no feast then, said Protap, the accountant, as he ruefully stroked his lean stomach. No feast, re-echoed Shama Churn the grain-dealer, as he thought, with a sigh, of the extra stock of rice and flour that he had laid in on account of the bridal. No feast, growled Nitye, the quack doctor, remembering the stomach-aches and indigestions which he would have had to cure, and the fees which would have consequently flowed into his pocket. No illuminations, snarled old Ram Lall, the oilman ; and then he remembered how good news it would be to his son, the Dipty, and reconciled himself even to the loss of the profits which he had calculated upon gaining at Kristo Baboo's expense. No bridal procession, no *tamasha* (display), complained the women; no fireworks nor coloured lanterns, whimpered the children: and from the one end of the village to the other, there was not a man or woman in Dhupnagar who did not feel personally aggrieved by the rupture between Krishna and Radha.

But when individual feelings had been exhausted, there was still a higher aspect in which the matter had to be regarded. If, as Dwarkanath, the schoolmaster, sagely remarked, a sacred ordinance, like marriage, were to be made and broken in this fashion, like the buying and selling of a yoke of oxen, society must soon come to a stand-still. Shama Churn, on his part, pointed out that no good could come of a marriage when love was at the bottom of it: had this been a contract made between two infants, there could be no doubt that it would have stood *pakka* (firm) enough.

Where, Shama Churn would ask, was there any authority to be found in the Shastras for adult unions? Where was there a single text to show that sons and daughters could follow their own inclination in forming matrimonial engagements? Where indeed? re-echoed Protap, the accountant; but if youngsters were allowed to make their own marriages, things would soon be as bad as in England itself, where even widows might marry a second—yea, a third or fourth time, without being faulted for indecency or wantonness. At this shocking statement of Protap's there was of course a general groaning and shaking of heads, while the elders breathed a prayer to the gods that the country might be preserved from the pollution of such practices. The conjecture was hazarded that perhaps Krishna might have relapsed into infidelity, and this supposition found general acceptance. But even if this were the case, what could the villagers do? They could not venture to quarrel with the priest, for he had once already shown them what the consequences would be if in his wrath he were to remove the Linga from Dhupnagar. Then if Kristo were to demand satisfaction at their hands for the slight offered to his family, and were to seek redress from a Panchayat, how would they get out of the difficulty? To this no answer was returned; but Shama Churn, and Dwarkanath, and Protap, and the others, separately made up their minds not to quarrel with the priest, and calculated to a certainty upon having an attack of fever on the day appointed for the Panchayat.

But there were three men of note whose voices were not heard upon this occasion. Neither Gangooly the headman, nor Three Shells the mahajan, nor Prosunno the lawyer, had as yet made an appearance on the village green ; and it was generally felt that any authoritative expression of opinion would be premature until their views of the matter had been ascertained. Gangooly had been seen at the door of Bejoy the *ghatak*, and there could be no doubt that his errand was to obtain some trustworthy information regarding the topic of the day. His news would then be well worth waiting for. As for Three Shells, the villagers were sure that they would be better without his counsel, if he could only be induced to refrain from volunteering it. So they postponed the subject until Gangooly's arrival should give them more certain data to go upon. Meanwhile, they had other matters of moment to discuss. Somehow or other it had oozed out that Afzul Khan was a prisoner in his father's house on account of the robberies, and that the Magistrate Sahib Eversley was coming to Dhupnagar to hold a grand assize for the conviction of the culprit. All agreed that it was a lucky thing to have a Muhammadan saddled with the offence, especially one who had given so much annoyance to decent people. Dwarkanath suggested that the Magistrate Sahib would most likely hang him on the tall palmyra-tree at the lower end of the village between the temple and Walesbyganj ; but Protap the accountant, who claimed to have a better acquaintance with the laws of the Sahibs, declared that such a punishment was not in the power of a Magistrate Sahib. Nobody less than a *Jaj* Sahib could hang a man. Why was that? Why, because when a Sahib was made a *Jaj*, he was taught a spell which gave him power over the spirits of the executed in another world; while a Magistrate Sahib could not hang a man without running the risk of retaliation at some future period of his existence. And why did not Government teach this spell to magistrates as well as to judges? did young Biprodass, the son of Shama Churn, ask. Oh, for this black age! when beardless youngsters ventured to catechise men who might be their fathers, instead of storing up their sayings with unquestioning reverence. Was it possible any one could have been so long at school as Biprodass had been, without learning that it was an essential part of the compact with the Powers of Evil, under which the English bore sway in Hindoostan, that this spell should be communicated to a strictly limited number of persons? Dwarkanath the schoolmaster, ashamed of the backwardness of his pupil, looks daggers at Biprodass, and the lad is ignominiously elbowed to the outside of the throng, cursing his unlucky forwardness. But this was clear, that there would be no execution in Dhupnagar, and everybody was sorry for it. The hanging of Afzul would have done much to console the villagers for the loss of Krishna's marriage procession.

At length Gangooly was seen coming slowly towards the village green, and was saluted by a perfect shower of questions. But to all the "hows," "whys," "whens," and "whos," Gangooly turned a deaf ear, and shook his head in answer to each query, with an aspect of preternatural gravity. When reminded that knowledge concealed in a man's heart was like a pearl hidden in the shell of an oyster, the headman drily responded in the scriptural proverb, that God had opened a way to the knowledge of all things except the heart of the vicious. It soon became apparent to them all that Gangooly had no story to tell, however he might attempt to disguise the fact: and this, indeed, was the case. He had gone boldly up to the match-maker's door, confident that a basket of the finest plantains in his garden, which he designed to present to Bejoy, would insure him a favourable reception, and perhaps open the *ghatak's* heart. But Bejoy's first words had dispelled this delusion. "Was there no dunghill nearer home that he (Gangooly) should bring such rotten rubbish to his (Bejoy's) house?" the irate *ghatak* had demanded, as he glared fiercely at the intruder. Gangooly glanced deprecatingly at the match-maker, and then at the bright yellow fruit which had been plucked while scarcely yet ripe, as plantains always should be; but this mute appeal made no impression on Bejoy, who called impatiently to a servant to take away the basket, and not annoy him further with such gardeners' trifles. Foiled in this stratagem, Gangooly next made a pretence of consulting him about his youngest daughter's marriage, although the maiden was only three years old, and he had not intended broaching the subject these good twelve months hence. But not even in this fashion was Bejoy to be mollified. He rudely told the headman that the *ghatak* of Gapshapganj was good enough for his brats, and that he himself had something else to do than to arrange powderless weddings—an effective sneer at Gangooly, who, at his son Gopal's late bridal, had gone the length of illuminations, but had grudged the fireworks, much against the will of the match-maker, who felt his professional dignity compromised when any of his "cases" did not pass off with sufficient *éclat;* and when Gangooly, despairing of any further success, had humbly begged that he might be permitted to take his departure propitiously, the *ghatak* had turned round his back with the spiteful imprecation, that he wished Gangooly's bier were carried out, for a chattering old parrot. From all which signs of temper, Gangooly sagely concluded that Bejoy the *ghatak* was very much annoyed by the breaking off of the marriage between the Gossains and the Lahories.

And it was so ; for the formal revocation of the contract had not taken place without Bejoy's violent opposition. Ramanath had flatly refused to take any further concern in the matter, and Krishna had been compelled himself to send for the match-maker. Nothing doubting that the summons related to an acceleration of the marriage, Bejoy had gladly prepared himself to wait upon the impatient lover, calculating in his own mind what obstacles he could throw in the way of Krishna's ardour, and how much money he ought to get for removing them. But when the match-maker, prim, and spruce, and scented, as if he had just stepped down from the window of a Bond Street milliner, presented himself in Krishna's sick-room, and marked the youth's careworn and haggard visage, he felt sure that something was wrong. But he was by no means prepared for what was to come. When Krishna began, with a trembling voice, and speaking in rapid and incoherent sentences, to announce his firm determination to give up Radha, Bejoy, who always seemed more or less cat-like, became on this occasion the very personification of feline rage. His eyes glistened, his hair and beard seemed to grow stiff and bristly, his head sank down, his back and shoulders rose up, and altogether he looked as if he would like to spring upon Krishna and worry him where he lay. But, undeterred by these symptoms of disapprobation, Krishna succeeded in making the *ghatak* understand that he must at once go to Kristo and have the contract cancelled.

"Phut! cancel the contract?" cried Bejoy, contemptuously; "but it can't be cancelled. Sacred Rama! do you think that I don't make my engagements more *pakka* (firm) than that? It is too late to speak of it now; the marriage must go on."

"Never!" cried Krishna, starting up on his bed. "I wouldn't marry Kristo Baboo's daughter though I were dragged with cords before her and fettered to her side. I tell you, the match is broken off, and you must do my errand to Kristo."

"There is, then," said Bejoy, turning his eyes piously towards the ceiling—"there is, then, no fear of the gods left upon earth. Break off a marriage after the betrothal, and within a month of its consummation! It's the rankest atheism. My good Baboo, you are unwell—you are fevered—your brain is excited—you can never mean what you are saying. I'll send Nitye, the *kobi-raj*, to let you some blood. You would not forgive me to your dying day if I were to do your bidding just now."

"I am seriously in earnest, I tell you," answered Krishna, impatiently. "The marriage is all over, and if I were bled to death, or if you argued until I were deaf, you could not change my resolution."

"Neither shall I change mine," hissed Bejoy, while he showed his teeth and spat like an enraged cat. "I have made this marriage, and it *shall* take place. I am not like the *ghataks* of Gapshapganj or Bhutpore, to be wound and unwound like a skein of silk. When Bejoy makes a match, nought save Yama, the god of death, can dissolve it." And without deigning to cast another look upon his young patron, Bejoy hurried away to the temple to make his complaint to Ramanath the priest. But Ramanath had troubles enough of is hown to bear without participating in the matchmaker's mortification. Krishna was again showing unequivocal signs of relapsing into infidelity. He had sent a message to that "mongrel Baboo," as Ramanath contemptuously designated Mr R. C. Roy, and the barrister had presented himself at the temple gate, but had been denied entrance by the jealous Modhoo, who refused point-blank to allow an unbeliever to set his foot inside the sacred *pomœrium*. Moreover, Ramanath had marked that his son had again gathered about him his long-neglected books of Theistic devotion, which was certainly a bad sign. So he was in no humour to listen to Bejoy's complaints; but gruffly told the match-maker that he and Krishna might settle the matter between them as best they might; and that for his own part he had given up all interference with his son's affairs. And so, after a futile attempt to arouse the priest to the exercise of his paternal authority, Bejoy took his leave, inwardly cursing the hour when he had been induced to meddle with the matrimonial affairs of the Gossain family.

"There is an utter want of principle about both father and son," grumbled Bejoy to himself as he left the temple—"an utter lack of delicacy and refinement upon the subject of marriage. I cannot forget the low, vulgar manner in which Ramanath wedded his present wife—went and asked her father's consent himself, as if there had not been a respectable *ghatak* in the whole country, or as if he had been a grass-cutter seeking a cow-woman for his wife, and not a high-caste Brahmin of wealth and repute. And he made his son Krishna's first marriage himself: well, it is like his work—a right amateur job. I would give a hundred rupees to the Linga of Dhupnagar that I had never put their names on my register. How these cursed low-caste *ghataks* of Bhutpore and Gapshapganj will sneer when they hear of it, vile panders and cozeners that they are!"

There was still one hope left to Bejoy. Kristo Baboo could not but feel deeply insulted at the slight offered to him by the Gossains, and with his co-operation the match-maker might still be able to force Krishna to fulfil his engagement. At all events, Kristo had probably got money before this time for the marriage expenses, which he could justly refuse to refund; and surely the Gossains would not be such fools as to throw away their rupees for nothing. This was an argument which would have great weight with so thrifty a man as Ramanath; and if Kristo would only take up the matter in a proper spirit, as, judging from his haughty and irritable temperament, he might well be expected to do, Bejoy had yet a prospect of bringing the case to a favourable issue. So he went straight across to the house of Lahory, not without many misgivings as to the reception that awaited him, but determined to preserve Kristo's friendship, and if possible to make the Baboo's wrath subservient to his own purpose.

When Bejoy entered the house of Lahory, he found the master seated in a shady nook of the verandah calmly enjoying a smoke. "He has heard nothing of the news," said the match-maker to himself. "I must break it to him cautiously, for the bearers of bad tidings often pay the penalty due to their message;" and he approached the Baboo, stepping with cat-like care, and purring and fawning as if he would wish to rub himself against Kristo's legs. The Baboo motioned to him to sit down, and began a conversation upon the weather, and the prospects of the early sowings.

"Evil news, Baboo, is like a wet cloak," said Bejoy, gravely, "which a messenger must put off before he can sit comfortably. I bespeak your favour for myself, and beg that you will be angry, not with me, but with my words."

"The worst calamity is lighter when it has been said than when it is presaged," returned Kristo, colouring as he laid down his hookha; "whatever may have happened, I expect nothing but goodwill from Bejoy the *ghatak*."

"Good men say good things," said Bejoy; "but alas for the shamelessness of this iniquitous generation, when the most sacred obligations lie as lightly upon men's shoulders as a fagot of withered grass! The holiest pledges are now worth nothing more than a puff of wind."

"May Doorga devour him! he has heard that I am going to break off the wedding," said Kristo to himself; "what excuse can I make that will satisfy this silly pedant?"

"But it is all owing to the evil example of the English that such wickedness has come among us," resumed Bejoy; "and to the carelessness of Hindoo fathers, who expose their children to the polluting influence of those unclean ones. If the marriage customs of a race are wrong, we need not look for either religion or morality."

Kristo was rather puzzled by this observation, and replied only by a surly grunt.

"That ill-starred one, the priest's son, who sways to and fro like a wind-tossed pine-tree, has again been causing scandal. Even now a devil has taken possession of him, leading him to renounce the marriage with your daughter. But you must be firm with him, Baboo—indeed you must."

"What!" echoed Kristo; "does Krishna want it broken off, did you say?"

"It is to my sorrow that I say so—to my sorrow and his shame," answered the match-maker, sitting as far away from Kristo as good manners would permit.

But Kristo exhibited none of the expected indications of anger. He only uttered an exclamation of surprise, and remained for some minutes engrossed in thought. "And what reason did Krishna allege for breaking off the match?" he at length asked.

"His pleasure—nothing else," cried Bejoy; "a fine way of going to work! But we'll teach him a lesson, won't we, Baboo? A pious man like you won't suffer the holy ordinance of marriage to be thus made nought of?"

"I don't see what I can do," said Kristo, reflectively; "I am not going to force my daughter down any man's throat. It was more to oblige my good friend Ramanath than because I had any wish to get Radha married, that ever I consented. If he and his son are content to end the matter, so I am sure am I."

"But, Baboo, bethink yourself!" cried Bejoy, starting up in horror at the strange apathy of the other; "consider that an essential part of our holy religion is at stake; think of the encouragement which you hold out to licentiousness and infidelity if you overlook so glaring a breach of faith. Why, if such conduct were to be tolerated, there would hardly a young man in the valley be brought to fulfil his marriage contract."

"And a good thing for the valley it would be too," said Kristo, with a sneer; "if there were no wives there would be no bickerings and backbitings, and all men would live like one father's sons. Most of the mischief in the valley has been of your making, my good Bejoy."

"Fear the gods, Baboo," returned Bejoy, solemnly; "a jest levelled at holy things recoils to the evil of the utterer. Think rather what men will say of you if you allow yourself to be thus affronted. Think of the afflicted souls of your pious ancestors who see their seed thus untimely cut off. Can it be that a Brahmin whose ancestors have been counted as *Kulins* (the noblest caste of Hindoos) since the days of Raja Beermala of Barendra Bhum, will make of himself a mat for these Gossains to wipe their shoes upon? How can you ever offer your daughter to another when Krishna Chandra has already lifted the veil off her face? Can a twice-born Brahmin thus eat dirt? Can a——"

"Peace, *ghatak!*" interrupted Kristo, haughtily. "I employ you to make marriages and not to protect the honour of my family, which, thank the gods! is in my own keeping. I am obliged to you for your services, and the Gossains will pay you. Depart in peace, and when next we meet, let us say no more of this matter."

"And you allow the marriage to be cancelled?" cried Bejoy, with much such an angry whine as a cat utters when she sees the tail of a mouse that she mentally destined for her prey, disappear into a hole. "O gods! what will the world come to? The Black Age is indeed begun!"

But Kristo had already disappeared within the house, and there was nothing left for Bejoy but to rise and go, which he accordingly did, invoking a heavy curse upon Kristo's roof-tree and all beneath it. Never, in the whole of his professional experience, had the match-maker met with such a mortification. His first resolve was to give up business altogether, and go and live at Benares upon his ample savings: the valley would not get on without him; but that was so much the better. But second thoughts suggested that it would be to the profit of the match-makers of Bhutpore and Gapshapganj should he quit the field ; and Bejoy at once made up his mind to die at his post. But he was afraid that the present failure would seriously affect his reputation, and he returned to his own house in a mood that was the opposite of amiable. And his passion was slowly working itself off when Gangooly the headman forced his way in ; so that it was not much wonder though the *ghatak* gave him a churlish reception.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THREE SHELLS SETS ABOUT WORK.

In those days, Three Shells, the mahajan, was basking in the sun of an unbroken prosperity. Somehow it seemed as if he could do nothing wrong. The greatest risks that he undertook turned out the safest possible investments; two or three of the most desperate debts upon his books had been unexpectedly cleared off; a lucky speculation in indigo which he had effected through his Calcutta agents had brought him a return of nearly fifty per cent; and not a breath of adverse wind rose to ruffle the even current of his good fortune. Things were going so well with him, in fact, that Three Shells felt a superstitious dread lest his run of luck might be "before something," and he would have been rather reassured had he met with some slight reverse —the loss of a few score of rupees on a ryot's bond, or the elopement of one of his small debtors—anything that would have relieved his mind as a sacrifice to the goddess of evil fortune. But when no cross fell to his lot, Three Shells began to bethink himself of taking the reins of Providence into his own hands, and of propitiating the celestials by the gift of another goblet to the Linga of Dhupnagar. There were more birds than one that Three Shells intended to kill with this stone.

The mahajan might well be proud of his position. In the Ghatghar palace the Rajah was now nothing more than Three Shells' tenant, whose daily bread depended upon the sufferance of the usurer. The estate was burdened down to the last foot of land and the last fruit-tree, and Three Shells had only to say the word to bring the whole to the hammer. At the last two collections the land-revenue of the Ghatghar estates had come out of Three Shells' pocket, and he had only to refuse the advance due at the coming term to have the estate distrained at the instance of the Government. In that case Three Shells knew well that he would have no other competitor for the purchase of the Ghatghar property, for no one would dare to bid for an estate so heavily encumbered. So far his course was plain enough; but as Three Shells had made up his mind to live and die as a reputable landholder in the Gungaputra district, he wished to avoid all appearance of dispossessing the present proprietor. The Rajah, though little more than five-and-twenty, was physically a worn-out and decrepit debauchee. His hand trembled as if he had been paralysed; his limbs tottered beneath the weight of his puny body upon the rare occasions when he tried to walk ; his senses were altogether deadened, so that he cared for nothing beyond the gratification of his present whim. He had twice had attacks of *delirium tremens*, and the English doctor who had come over from Pultunpore to prescribe for his Highness, had declared that the next attack would assuredly prove fatal. In that case, Three Shells could take possession without much disturbance, for the Rajah had no children, nor had he adopted any one to succeed him. So the mahajan patiently waited in hope, and ungrudgingly settled his Highness's bill to the Calcutta wine-merchants for cherry-brandy ; nor did he withhold the money necessary to induce a beautiful half-caste madam, who had caught the Rajah's fancy, to take up her residence at the Ghatghar palace. So long as his Highness was bent upon ruining himself, Three Shells was only too happy to aid him in doing so as pleasantly as possible.

There was another matter that had to be settled before Three Shells could have the confidence to remove to Ghatghar. He was still under the power of Ramanath, the priest, and a single word from him would overthrow all Three Shells' airy castles, and turn Three Shells himself into an outlawed criminal. So long as Three Shells gave no cause of offence to the Gossains, he was tolerably safe ; but he did not know in what light Ramanath would regard his usurpation of the Ghatghar property, for there had been an old friendship between the priest and the Rajah's miserly father; and moreover, his marriage with Radha could not fail to be construed as an act of hostility by both Ramanath and his son. Of the sealed packet which contained his secret, Three Shells was now master, and if the priest were out of the way, he would have nothing to fear. Four or five times every day he had looked into the recess where this important document was deposited with his money and private papers; but somehow or other his heart always failed him when he would have destroyed it, for he knew that its destruction must be the signal for Ramanath's removal. Still less had he ever ventured to break the seal and read the contents of the packet. Ah! he knew only too well the story that was written there—a story that was graven in his own heart in lines of terror, if not remorse—a story that he had daily conned in his mind for more than twenty years. And so he took out the packet and gnashed his teeth over it, and struck it viciously with his open palm, and then returned it to its former concealment. But the time was at hand when Three Shells would have to take action—prompt and vigorous action, if he would save himself from danger; and so the mahajan began to arrange his preliminary measures. In the first place, all must be over before the magistrate came to Dhupnagar. Prosunno had told him that Mr Eversley was to hold an investigation into the robberies in little more than a week, and Three Shells had good reason for wishing to have his house set in order before that time. Mr Eversley had a lively prejudice against mahajans, and had once given Three Shells himself a very rough handling when the money-lender had come into the Bhutpore Court to sue for the recovery of a debt upon a bond which the defendant averred to have been fraudulently tampered with. If Eversley Sahib were disposed to make searching inquiries, there were those in Three Shells' house whose presence would turn suspicion into an entirely new channel; and yet Three Shells could not venture to dismiss his tools so long as Ramanath, the priest, walked the earth. Then, he had already announced his intention of presenting another *lota* to the Linga; and if Ramanath were allowed to live much longer, Three Shells would be compelled to redeem his promise. But the mahajan had no design of doing so. He had merely spoken of the gift because it would help to divert all suspicion from himself when Ramanath was murdered; and the unsound opinions of the priest's son were an excellent excuse for an orthodox man like Three Shells revoking his promise. Not but what Three Shells really considered that some special sacrifice was due to the gods at so critical a juncture; but then he wisely thought that he might make more powerful interest for himself by propitiating another divinity. He had already made such a handsome offering to Siva that the god would surely overlook a liberty taken with the life of one of his servants; and Three Shells thought he might as well give his *lota* to the goddess Kalee, who delighted in blood, and who would surely befriend a liberal votary at a pinch. So the golden vessel, which was being prepared in Calcutta ostensibly for the Linga of Dhupnagar, was really intended to grace the shrine of Kalee at Bhutpore, providing always that the money-lender succeeded in effecting his object with regard to Ramanath's removal.

As for Kristo Baboo, Three Shells had got the entire ascendancy over him. By degrees he had convinced the Baboo how hopelessly he was involved, how completely he held his property at his, Three Shells', sufferance; and how easy it would be to turn him out of doors a beggar with his daughter in his hand. The ties that bound Kristo to home, and to the lands that had been his fathers', were the strongest feelings in his nature, and he felt that there was no sacrifice which he could not make to be allowed to end his days in the old house. And this much Three Shells promised him, provided he listened to reasonable conditions. But there had been a sore struggle in Kristo's heart before he could bring himself to listen to Three Shells' propositions regarding his daughter. His caste was almost as dear to him as his property; but then, as Three Shells bluntly told him, caste would never fill his belly when Banksi Lall of Barra Bazaar had turned him out of doors to beg his bread.

"But what use could my daughter be to you?" pleaded Kristo. "There is no suitableness, no parity, between you. You are three times her age, and have more than six times her judgment. She is good for nothing but to spend money, while you are desirous of saving it. Take my advice, worthy Baboo Three Shells, and have nothing to do with so useless a slut as Radha. There are plenty of worthy girls who would keep you comfortable, and deal thriftily with your substance; but poor Radha comes of a stock of wasters. I am obliged to you for your proposal, but the last of the Lahories of Dhupnagar must spend her days as an unhonoured virgin in her father's house."

Though Kristo strove to speak as courteously as he could, there was an accent of bitterness in his tones, and his heart was sick within him at the thought of how far he had fallen when a low-caste *parvenu* like Three Shells could venture to ask him for his daughter. The day had been when Kristo would have punished such an insult by beating the mahajan within an inch of his life, and now he must hear him with smiling lips and a smooth tongue.

"But I am no miser," returned Three Shells. "As I've made my money freely, I'll spend my money freely. And who is there that would become wealth better than your daughter? I shall deck her out in silks and in jewels, until the very courtesans in Indra's heaven burst their galls for envy."

"May Siva keep my senses!" said Kristo to himself, "but this is more than I can well bear. Does a Brahmin go for nothing in the sight of heaven nowadays that I am thus given over to be tormented by this vile out-caste?" But he said aloud, "And yet, my good friend, I see not well how it can be. I am not of those who ride atop of their caste, and I doubt not but your origin is perfectly honourable and respectable; but the men of my *dol* (set, social section) are so bigoted and narrow-minded that I should sharp a razor to cut my own throat if I gave my daughter to one who did not belong to the ennobled race of Kulins."

"Bah!" said Three Shells; "carry your Kulinism to the bazaar, and see whether it will buy you a mess of dry rice for dinner. When I'm zemindar of Ghatghar, there isn't a Kulin in the Gungaputra district but would change castes with me. Caste nowadays is a mere byword, and it is money that makes men salaam."

"But I know not what the girl will say," pleaded Kristo. "She has a will of her own, as all of her kin have had, and it may not be easy to obtain her consent. I remember when old Ganga Prasad of Gapshapganj wanted to marry her, she threatened to break her neck by jumping from the *zenana* window rather than become his bride."

"Phut! my good Kristo"—the good Kristo winced sorely at this familiarity, as well as at the weight of the usurer's hand upon his shoulder—"have you been thus long a husband and father and yet know not how to manage a woman? Tell her of the diamonds, man, and the silks and the ornaments. Tell her that

I shall fit her up a bower as bright as Agni-loka, the paradise of the fire-god. Tell her, too, that she shall command every one at Ghatghar from the greatest to the least, and that old Three Shells shall bow the lowest of all to do her bidding. Ay, and she shall keep the key of my coffers, too, or may I never draw a pice of interest again. Tell her all this, my worthy father, and I warrant she will not be so rash in breaking her sweet pigeon neck."

"I wish somebody would break your serpent's neck, you vile one! but that, I reckon, is reserved for the gallows," inwardly ejaculated Kristo; but he added aloud, "Well, friend Three Shells, I shall do my best; but we are all in the hands of the gods; it will be as they will, do we all that we may."

"And as you deal with me, so shall I deal with you. Give me your daughter, and you shall have gold *muhrs* where the Gossains would not have given you rupees. Play me false, and I shall send you and your daughter out of doors with scarce clothes to cover your nakedness. Remember that Banksi Lall of Barra Bazaar in Calcutta has expressly said that this marriage must take place."

"Oh!" groaned Kristo, who knew by experience that there was no further argument when Banksi Lall's name was mentioned — "I wish Banksi Lall would mind his own business. I wish he was tied down to his funeral-pile, and his ashes cast into the middle of the Hooghly."

"Hush!" cried Three Shells, holding up his forefinger reproachfully; "I will not hear my friend Banksi Lall thus spoken of. A most benevolent man is Banksi, so rich, and so liberal, and so eccentric; quite beggars himself on behalf of his clients, and takes such an interest in people, too."

Kristo muttered something under his breath which did not sound at all like a blessing upon Banksi Lall, and, rising from his seat, begged that the money-lender would allow him to take his departure. But this Three Shells would not do until he extracted from the horrified Baboo a promise that he would join him to-morrow night at supper. When all conceivable excuses had been at last exhausted, Kristo muttered an unwilling assent, but resolved in his own mind that if there were drugs enough in Dhupnagar to make a man unwell, sickness should save him from degrading his caste by dipping his hand in the same dish with Three Shells. When the Baboo had quitted the money-lender's premises, Three Shells sent away the misshapen Gopee on an errand to Gapshapganj, and, having locked the door of his office, retired to his private room. Filling himself a hookha, he sat down and began to plan out the work that lay before him.

"He is under my feet now," chuckled he, "and, by Brahma! he shall feel the weight of them. How the fellow used to sniff and sneer at me when I first had dealings with him, and would have strutted past me upon the highroad, hardly deigning to notice my lowest salutations with the corner of his eye! But fat closes the eyes, while even the blind beggar will see a four-anna bit in the gutter, as the old saw says; and so Kristo Baboo must carry his head a little lower when he comes in my way; and now he will be even as I am, for 'One dish, one caste;' or, rather, he will be worse than I am, for wealth makes a man independent of caste. And he will be the slave of my mouth; yea, my slave as much as though I had bought him; and I have bought him—both him and his daughter. I shall hasten on this marriage, once Ramanath is out of the way. If that rickety Rajah does not think of dying before long, I shall not be able to wait his convenience. But he can't be long; it is impossible. His toady, Keshub, told me yesterday that his master had not been sober since last festival. I shall send him a cask of the strongest Belattee (European) brandy in a present, if he holds out long. Ah! that which is strength to one is weakness to another; and I shall need some extra strength for the work that I have to do."

Unlocking a wall *almira*, Three Shells took out a bottle of spirits and held it to his mouth, swallowing three or four draughts in rapid succession. He then returned the bottle to its concealment, smacked his lips with great gusto, and resumed his seat; first, however, taking his pistols from under the cushions and satisfying himself that they were in an effective condition. "Now I can deal with them," he said; "there is no saying what these two *badmashes* (blackguards) would not do if they got an opportunity. I'm thankful I'm going to get clear of them, and never, while I live, shall I again have such cattle under my own roof. *Qui hye?* (who's there?) Panchoo! Tettoo!"

Panchoo, to whom the reader has already been introduced, soon made his appearance, accompanied by his comrade Tettoo—a squat, bull-necked, little man, whose well-knit frame denoted great personal strength, and whose face wore an expression of almost infantile simplicity, to which a squint of the right eye imparted an expression of comic jollity. Panchoo was the head, and Tettoo was the hands. The one plotted, the other executed; and the less clever rogue got all the dirty and dangerous work to do, while his comrade pocketed the lion's share of the booty. But Three Shells was as much intellectually superior to Panchoo as Panchoo was to Tettoo; and the two ruffians, having made their reverence, stood humbly before the money-lender, waiting to hear what he had to say to them.

"Well, my children," said the mahajan, in his sleekiest manner, and using a slang dialect in vogue among the melters of bell-metal, and other classes who cover the receipt of stolen property under the pretence of exercising some similar craft—"well, my children, and how is the time passing with you? Why, Panchoo, you are getting fatter and fatter every day. That comes of having nothing to do and plenty to eat. You would have had less flesh upon your bones if you had spent the winter with Bhugvan Dass in the jungle."

"I wish I had been with Bhugvan," said Panchoo, with a sigh; "we should have had at least the free air above us and the wide forest to stretch our limbs in. We might as well have been in jail as here, Baboo."

"We might as well have been in jail as here," re-echoed Tettoo, positively, who, although he never ventured an opinion of his own on any subject, always deemed it his duty to support his comrade.

"Indeed," said Three Shells, sarcastically; "I was not aware that the Magistrate Sahibs offered such encouragement to their *kaidies* (prisoners) as I have been in the habit of giving you. Let me see. You had ten hundred rupees between you this last month,—had you not? That is what I call a fair wage, considering the time and the trouble."

"Ay, and you had nine thousand to your share out of the same *loot* (plunder)," returned Panchoo, doggedly.

"Yes, Baboo, nine thousand," reiterated Tettoo, with a shake of the head and a wink of his squinting eye.

"Well, and wasn't there a good reason why I should?" retorted Three Shells. "Could you ever have known of the ten thousand rupees that I lent to Kristo Baboo, unless I had told you? Could you ever have stolen them without my directions? Didn't I even give you a key that opened the safe? Why, Panchoo, I did everything except the actual stealing, and you grudge me my share."

"Nay, Baboo, but when Tettoo and I risked the chance of being caught, surely we should have shared equally with you who were in no danger," grumbled Panchoo.

"Ay," said Tettoo, "we had all the danger, and would have been sent to jail if we had been caught. Nothing would have befallen *you.*"

"Well, and didn't you say a minute ago that you would have been better off in jail than in my house? I never had to do with such ungrateful grumblers. I believe I shall have to let you go home to your own country; for you eat and drink all the profits that I make off your work."

The cloud cleared off Panchoo's face. "Yes, we'll go home," said he, readily, "as soon as it is your pleasure to give us leave."

"Certainly," said Tettoo, with a blithe wink of the squinting eye; "we shall go home."

"Well, and as I should like you to go home with full *kummerbands* (girdles), and not like men coming back from a pilgrimage, I shall just set you one last task, and, if you manage it successfully, I'll give each of you a thousand rupees."

"A thousand rupees, Tettoo!" said Panchoo, brightening up, and smiling upon his colleague.

"A thousand rupees, Panchoo!" returned Tettoo, the winker.

"Ay, you will be *barra sahibs* (great gentlemen) when you go back to your villages," said Three Shells, with an affable grin; "and the folks will salaam to you as lowly as if you were a *munsiff* (petty judge) or a police-sergeant; and then you may turn money-lenders yourselves, and you'll soon make your thousand rupees ten thousand."

"We're not rogues enough for that, Tettoo," said Panchoo, with an impudent grin.

"Not quite for that, Panchoo," sniggered Tettoo, convulsed with suppressed laughter at his comrade's joke.

Three Shells threw a wicked look at them. "I'm glad to think that you are going to lead an honest life," he said, with a hypocritical sniff. "I trust that of your abundance there will not be lacking gifts to the gods and to their holy ministers. Remember that 'ten in this world is a thousand in the next.' And as the scriptures say, 'There are no riches but what a man enjoys himself or gives in gifts; the rest goes to others,' hem!"

And when he had unburdened himself of these pious counsels Three Shells rubbed his hands complacently, and half shut his little eyes.

"But what is the job that you want done?" demanded Panchoo, impatiently, while he did not seek to dissemble his disgust at the mahajan's hypocrisy. As for Tettoo, he seemed to consider Three Shells' advice as a rare piece of humour, and grinned until the extremities of his mouth were extended almost to his ears.

"Ay, what is the job?" repeated Tettoo.

"Oh, it is not to break into the Collector Sahib's iron chest in the Bhutpore Treasury; nor yet is it to slay a sepoy armed with gun and bayonet; so there isn't much courage required. But I want it carefully and cautiously done, and that is why I am willing to pay so much for it."

"What is it, then?" asked Panchoo; "it isn't the building of temples, or the offering of sacrifices that you want performed, or you would get somebody else to do it, eh, Tettoo?"

"Not quite, Panchoo," giggled Tettoo.

"Well, it isn't a matter of much importance after all," said Three Shells, carelessly. "There is a man here in my way who would be happier in heaven than he can be on earth, and there couldn't be very much harm in sending him thither."

"Oh, it's a man!" said Panchoo, turning pale, and beginning to fumble uneasily with his hands.

"A man!" cried Tettoo, with a blank look, as he turned inquiringly towards his mate.

There was a moment of utter silence. Three Shells made no answer, but sat with closed eyelids, and a gentle, almost pitying smile upon his countenance. Panchoo clenched his fists, and breathed hard, while Tettoo seemed absorbed in studying Panchoo's demeanour.

"Who is he?" the former at length asked, in a low husky voice, while his echo struck in in a more cheerful tone; "ay, what's his name?"

"No formidable antagonist," smiled Three Shells. "A fat, pursy, old fellow, who would faint with terror at the sight of Panchoo's knife. One squeeze of friend

Tettoo's fingers upon his weasand, and the man is as dead as King Dasaratha. It is only the priest of the Linga's temple."

"Only the priest of the Linga's temple!" ejaculated Panchoo, beginning to tremble, while even Tettoo turned pale, and words failed him to repeat the other's exclamation.

"That is all!" said the mahajan, with a pleasant smile, as he locked his fingers into each other, and began to twirl his thumbs. "I would never ask you to tackle a dangerous person."

"I won't do it," said Panchoo, decisively. "If it had been any other body I should not have cared; but I dare not stretch forth my hand against a Brahmin. I'd rather murder twenty Mussulmans any day."

"Much rather!" said Tettoo.

"Phut, you fool!" sneered the money-lender; "what are you frightened at? Do you believe all the silly stories these priests tell you out of their Shastras? Is a Brahmin made of finer flesh and blood than other men's. Would you know the ashes of a Brahmin from those of a Sudra if you saw both lying side by side on the burning-ghat. It is easy for the priests to say that they are sacred, but we have only their own word for it. I had looked for more courage from both of you. But never mind; I am in no hurry about it, and the two thousand rupees will always be useful to me. Only, remember this, Panchoo, you leave not Dhupnagar until the priest has been put out of the way."

"And why not?" asked Panchoo, with a scowl, as he stepped forward, while Tettoo also clenched his fists, and said, "Why not?"

"Because," said Three Shells, drawing a pair of pistols carelessly from below the cushions; "because I would put the police upon you before you were half-way through the passes. Now hold your tongue. I know what you are going to say; you would threaten to betray me, but you can't. I can buy as many witnesses as would blacken both your evidences, and banish you for life across black water. Don't think of going away, unless you want to make me your foe."

Panchoo turned and looked at Tettoo, with a deep-drawn sigh, which Tettoo immediately re-echoed.

"Ah! I know you will see what a good job it is to have a thousand rupees apiece for ten minutes' trouble. And by the second watch of the morning of the day after to-morrow you may be beyond the Panch Pahar hills on your homeward journey. Go to your room, and take this bottle with you, and think over the matter. I'll give you full directions how the thing is to be done;" and taking a bottle of brandy from his private cupboard, the mahajan handed it to Panchoo. The ruffian clutched at it greedily, turned upon his heel with a rude salaam, and strode out of the room, followed by Tettoo, who fondly licked his lips, and whetted his palate at the anticipation of good liquor.

"I thought they would have given me more trouble," said Three Shells to himself, with a sigh. "I believe they have conscience enough to kill a cow if anybody was to pay them for it. I feel more compunction for my share in the matter than they do, although they are going to do the actual deed. And Ramanath's blood can't be on my head. No, no; the gods forbid that I should put forth a hand to ruffle a hair of his head! Let blood be with those by whom blood is spilt. And now," said Three Shells, going towards the recess where his money was kept, "now I can get rid of that accursed paper. The destruction of it is the first step towards freeing myself from Ramanath's chains, and when once it is taken, there can be no backdrawing. I would like to read it, but I dare not. No, no; I know too well what is written there; but I should not sleep to-night were I to see my guilt described by another."

Taking his spirit-bottle from the cupboard, Three Shells soaked the packet with spirits, and then placed it upon the earthen pan full of live coals which he kept by him for lighting his hookha. After blowing steadily for a few minutes, the sparks began to leap and the paper to crackle, and in another minute the whole was in a blaze.

"There," said Three Shells, as he scattered the blackened ashes, "my secret now dies with Ramanath Gossain."

And so the mahajan sat down to the complacent enjoyment of a *chillum* of tobacco.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AGHA'S PILGRIMAGE.

A GLOOM like that cast by the presence of death had been hanging over Walesbyganj since the night of Afzul Khan's arrest. The Subadar remained shut up in his own room, engrossed in his devotions and in his own gloomy thoughts. Agha was excluded from his presence, and it was with the utmost difficulty that Byram, the old *khansamah* could induce his master to take as much food as was barely necessary for his sustenance. Day after day the Subadar dressed himself with scrupulous care in the full uniform and trappings of his rank, down to the spurs and minutest buckle, and sat erect and stiffly by the table, on which lay his sword, the Koran, a copy of the Articles of War for the Native Army, and the Government Gazettes of olden days, in which his name had been so often and so honourably mentioned. Probably the old man had some feeling that he was sitting upon a military board or regimental court-martial all the time, and the ghosts of old comrades, whose bones were rotting among the mud of the Five Rivers, or bleaching in the snow-blocked passes of Afghanistan, may have been crowding around him to aid the Subadar in his gloomy deliberations. It was by means of the uniform and the fiction of doing duty that the Subadar was at all able to maintain his resolution. In his dressing-gown he was only a battered, broken-hearted, old veteran, powerless to enforce his authority, and wholly at the mercy of his parental affections; but with the garb of his profession, all the military vigour and spirit of his youth seemed to come back to him. Agha had made several attempts to sap his master's resolution. He had even condescended to make interest with the Rajah of Ghatghar's *mallees* (gardeners), that he might obtain slips of a magnificent double-cupped rose-tree, which could hardly fail to excite the admiration of so enthusiastic a florist as his master. But the Subadar had sternly told him to remove the rubbish, and had slammed the door in his face. It was in vain that the Khyberee gathered bouquets of his master's favourite flowers in the early morning, while the dew still lay in drops upon their buds, and ordered them to be placed where they might attract the Subadar Sahib's attention; Shamsuddeen was utterly unconscious of their perfumes. Then, indeed, Agha began to lose all hopes of being able to effect any diversion on behalf of his young master. He had become a mere cipher in the household. The Subadar had sent down to Pultunpore for the services of two Hindoo troopers to aid him in maintaining discipline; and one of these was constantly on sentry by the door of the old *zenana*, where Afzul Khan was confined. Swart and sullen-looking fellows they were, Jats of the Manjha, Sikhs of the Sikhs, the sworn enemies of all true sons of Islam, who could have little sympathy with Agha's sorrows, and who scowled and twisted their stiffened moustaches whenever the Khyberee came into their vicinity. Agha mentally determined that if ever he received a call to become a *Ghazzee*—that is, to tread the blessed paths of martyrdom for slaying an unbeliever—he would begin with one or other of these Sikh sentries.

The more Agha reflected upon his troubles, the more he became convinced that the present crisis called for some display of religious devotion. Let him polish for hours at the barrel of his favourite pistol, he could see no other remedy for Afzul's misfortunes but the mercy of Allah. And Agha could not but confess how unworthy he was of the favours of heaven. He had, it was true, been liberal in giving alms to indigent believers; he had even done his best to persecute and molest all Hindoo enemies of the Faith who came in his way, and had once beaten a Bengalee *syce* (groom), until the poor wretch had been glad to buy off the bastinado by repeating the Muhammadan confession of faith: but all these virtues were as a molehill compared with the mountains of his transgressions;

his wine-bibbing and wantonness, neglected times of prayer and violated fast-days, his rejection of the Prophet's precepts, and persistence in those things which the Sent of Allah had forbidden to his disciples, and above all, the evil examples and counsels by which he had ruined his young master. He had made some attempts at amendment during the last few days—he had forsworn Rutton Pal and his wares—he had even performed the requisite number of prayers and ablutions enjoined by the Prophet; but these expressions of penitence were of too short standing to be much depended upon, and Agha felt that some special effort must be made to ingratiate himself with the higher power that presided over human destinies.

To this end he undertook a pilgrimage, at once the simplest and most efficacious way of winning religious merit. In the neighbouring district of Lallkor stands the celebrated shrine of Ajibganj, so called from the miracles which had been wrought at the tomb of the Mussulman saint, Pir Murtaza Ali. This reverend personage had arrived in Bengal before the valley of the Gungaputra had been subjugated to Muhammadan rule, and had suffered many persecutions and dangers at the hands of the heathen inhabitants. Taking up his abode on the spot where the town of Bhutpore now stands, then a tract of wild jungle, the holy man spent his days and nights in praying that the glory of Islam would dawn upon the darkened country. At length the Brahmins of the valley, apprehensive of the effect of his orisons, raised by their exorcisms an army of *bhuts* (demons) to destroy the stranger; but with the sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, Murtaza Ali kept his hellish foes at bay for a whole summer night; and they fled cowed and baffled at the false dawn never to return. When morning broke, the Prophet appeared to the exhausted warrior and held to his lips a golden chalice full of such wine as "the damsels with swelling bosoms, of equal age," shall present to the pious in Paradise. "See ye not these cinders?" said the Elected One, pointing to the charred and shapeless ashes of the demons whom the valour of the believer had vanquished; "verily there shall a house arise where each of them now lies in which the name of Allah shall be called upon until the consummation of all things." The truth of this legend is attested by the name Bhutpore, or the demons' town, as well as by the number of mosques therein, which corresponds exactly with the demons that perished beneath the hand of Murtaza Ali. When he had converted the Gungaputra district to the faith of Islam, in which good work he received considerable assistance from the presence of a Muhammadan army, Murtaza Ali went into the adjoining district of Lallkor, there to propagate a knowledge of the true faith. Being weary and footsore, the saint sat down at the door of a Hindoo Rajah and craved a mess of rice and a cupful of water for charity's sake. The Rajah drove him away with foul words; upon which the holy man said, with a smile, that he would be more civil to the next Muhammadan who came. This prophecy was literally fulfilled; for in a few weeks the Mussulman host burst in, and the Rajah was a fugitive, houseless and landless. But this was only one of many prophecies by which the saint had demonstrated the divine mission of Islam.

After a long life of piety and usefulness, during which he wrought many notable miracles and showed divers signs and testimonies, the time came at last when the saint was to enter upon the reward of his labours. Murtaza Ali fell sick of a fever in his hermitage at Ajibganj; but when his disciple would have gone to fetch a physician, the saint forbade him, saying that he expected a *hakim* (doctor) who would work an effectual cure upon him. The disciple's affection was, however, stronger than his obedience, and he set off in quest of a physician; but though he searched a whole day he could find none. Returning to the hermitage at eventide, he was amazed to see the grot surrounded by a halo of celestial light, and to find an animal of dazzling whiteness, that was neither mule nor ass, but yet resembled both, waiting by the door. The disciple knew from this that the Prophet was with his master, and he prostrated himself in prayer, never daring to lift his head until the vision had disappeared. When he went inside he found that his master had just breath enough left to bless him and to give instructions about his funeral, all of which the disciple faithfully carried out.

It could hardly be possible that Agha should seek in vain for peace at the shrine of such a man. The whole country rang with marvels that had been wrought at the tomb of Murtaza Ali—marvels which none but a dog of a Hindoo unbeliever would presume to doubt—and the shrine had been enriched by the gratitude of those who had obtained the saint's favour. Agha was too much of a gentleman to trouble the holy man for nothing; and his girdle was stuffed with a goodly bag of silver, as well as with sundry precious trinkets which had come into his possession in the Sikh wars and in the Mutiny, in a way that was scarcely sanctioned by the general orders about plunder. It had been a difficult matter for Agha to decide how this pilgrimage was to be performed. Strict piety demanded that the journey should be made on foot; but it was a long and wearisome road from Dhupnagar to Ajibganj, and Agha thought that wounds and infirmities gave him a fair pretext for going on horseback. His spiritual adviser at Bhutpore had indeed told him that he might as well sit at home if he did not walk every inch of the way to Ajibganj; but then Moulvie Abdullah had done his best to dissuade the trooper from repairing to the shrine of Murtaza Ali at all, vaunting the superior sanctity of the White Mosque of Bhutpore, where a bunch of hair from the camel's tail which bore the Prophet on his flight to Medina was preserved for the comfort of all true believers, and where he himself was a reader. But Agha was shrewd enough to divine the motives which led his reverend adviser to throw as many obstacles as possible in the way of a rival shrine; and so he made up his mind to ride to Ajibganj, feeling certain that a slight additional *bakshish* would condone the irregularity in the eyes of the venerable guardian of Murtaza Ali; while Moulvie Abdullah went his way back to Bhutpore, his mind filled with misgivings regarding the future welfare of his headstrong disciple, who was so blinded by the Evil One as to place the trumpery relics of an Afghan *fakir* before the sacred tail of the Prophet's own camel—the peace of God and rest be upon both him and her!

Agha commenced his pilgrimage under happy auspices, which gave him sanguine hopes of a favourable issue. Before he had well seated himself in the saddle, and while he was yet giving the groom instructions as to what was to be done in his absence, Sultan caught the bit between his teeth, and bounding forward, upset the portly figure of Shama Churn the grain-dealer, who happened to be then passing on his way to the bathing-ghat. Luckily for the Hindoo, a wet ditch by the wayside received him and saved him from injuries, but he bellowed as loudly as if all his bones had been broken. "Well done, Sultan!" said Agha, patting the horse's neck as he put spurs to him; "that is a better beginning than saying twenty *bismillahs*. I would you had broken the old infidel's neck. You shall have a double feed of gram when we come back, my horse, for your piety. Forward, then, in the name of God!"

Agha had grave doubts whether or not it was a decorous thing to gallop on a pilgrimage, and he conformed so far to his religious scruples, that he restricted Sultan's pace to a broken trot the whole way to Ajibganj. Accordingly the day was well advanced when he reached the tomb of Murtaza Ali; and the porter, who looked not a little scandalised at seeing a pilgrim on horseback, told him that Pir Muhammad, the keeper of the shrine, was taking his noonday nap, and could not be disturbed upon any pretence. So Agha had to picket his horse outside the sacred precincts, and then he went and sat down in the shade of the arched gateway by which the holy place is entered, doing his best to bring himself to a devotional frame of mind. But it was always a difficult task for Agha to fix his thoughts upon religious subjects, and before long he was deeply interested in the account which the porter gave him of an old comrade of his, one Ahmed Khan, a Reisaldar of Walesby's Horse, who had lately made a pilgrimage to Ajibganj, and whose liberality the porter loudly praised, in hopes, perhaps, that his auditor might thereby be stimulated to greater generosity.

The shrine of Murtaza Ali was a quadrangular building entered by an arched doorway, the mouldings of which bore a suspicious resemblance to the ornaments of a Hindoo temple. Three sides were occupied by cloisters cut off by a double row of pillars from the open courtyard. The west wing, that towards Mecca, was occupied by the tomb of the saint, over which a mosque had been raised by one of the Muhammadan viceroys of Bengal. An oblong slab of dark-green granite—so dark that it seemed at first sight to be wholly black—above the door of the mosque, bore an inscription in bad Arabic to the effect that—"THIS MOSQUE—MAY IT BE BLESSED TO ISLAM AND THE MUSLIMS!—WAS ERECTED BY THE LORD OF THE AGE, THE OWNER OF THE NECKS OF NATIONS, DAOOD KHAN, KING OF BENGAL—MAY GOD PERPETUATE HIS RULE AND KINGDOM!—IN HONOUR OF THE RENOWNED SAINT AND LAMP OF THE FAITH, PIR MURTAZA ALI KHAN—MAY GOD MAKE HEAVEN HIS DWELLING-PLACE!" Before the steps of the mosque a small space was shut in by a gilt railing, now sorely tarnished and weather-beaten. Inside this enclosure the eye of faith might discern the hoof-prints of the sacred beast, Alborak, upon the exact spot where he had once stood at the door of Murtaza Ali's grot. Certainly the marks of four horse-shoes, each fitted with the proper number of nails and finished in a style that was highly creditable to celestial farriery, were distinctly visible in the laterite slabs. Admission to kiss these relics was an essential part of the pilgrimage, and had to be purchased by a round largess to the guardian of the shrine. It was a moot point among Muhammadan divines whether the saying of seven *Fathahs*[*] at the tomb of the saint, or the kissing of the prints of the heavenly beast's feet, was the more efficacious act of devotion. Pir Muhammad, the keeper of the mosque, who was bound to gratuitously admit the poorest *fakir* to pray by the grave of Murtaza Ali, but who charged a handsome fee for the other privilege, held strong convictions in favour of the latter rite.

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[*] The *Fathah*, or "Opener," is the first *sura* of the Koran, beginning, "Praise be to God, the Lord of Creation, the All-merciful, the All-compassionate."

In course of time slumber fled from the eyes of the reverend Pir Muhammad, and he came forth with arms extended above his head and yawning like an ogre. Agha got up and made his lowest obeisance, announcing himself as Agha, the son of Jubbar Khan of the Khyber, who had come all the way from Dhupnagar, in the Gungaputra district, to seek first the favour of God Most High; secondly, that of His Accepted One, Pir Murtaza Ali; and thirdly, the blessing of the saint's present venerable successor—might God cover him with His pardon! In view of which he supplicated his spiritual father to take him under his protection, and out of the depths of his boundless knowledge to show him those ceremonies which were necessary to a proper performance of his pilgrimage.

The Pir nodded his acknowledgments of this complimentary address, and asked Agha a few general questions about his Khyberee clansmen and kinsfolk, while his sharp eye seemed all the time to be estimating the pilgrim's worldly circumstances, and his mind to be engaged in calculating the amount of the fees which he might venture to exact from him. Then bidding Agha follow, he led the way inside to a small closet in the cloisters, where he sat down, and motioning to the pilgrim to follow his example, prepared to hear his visitor disclose his spiritual state.

"Ay, ay! even so, even so, even so!" snuffled the Pir, sententiously, when Agha had made a general confession of his backslidings. "With Allah there is a refuge from the wicked one. Well saith Ali, the Prophet's vicegerent—may both be in the vicinity of God's glory!—'Repentance purifieth the heart and washeth away sin.' 'Verily,' as it is written in the Book—'verily, man is to his Lord ungrateful, and he himself is a witness thereof.' Surely it is not to pamper their worthless bodies and to feed their lusts with debaucheries and uncleannesses that Allah has given prosperity to men, but that they might use it to the spread of His knowledge and in ministering to the wants of His servants. Saith not the Prophet, 'He that heapeth up riches and numbereth them for the future, he thinketh surely that his wealth shall be with him for ever; nay, for verily he shall be cast into the crushing fire'? And again, 'He that giveth of his wealth to purify his soul withal, he it is indeed that shall be satisfied.' Ameen!"

While the Pir was carrying on his discourse, Agha had been fumbling in his waistband, counting over his money, and wondering in his own mind what was the least sum that a sinner like himself could tender with decency.

"Ameen!" he re-echoed; "and, holy Pir, I would fain, out of my small substance, bestow upon you such a sum as would entitle me to the benefit of your prayers. These thirty rupees are, I know, a trifle unworthy of your notice; nevertheless——"

"And there be those," continued the Pir, with an indignant sniff, not deigning to notice Agha's outstretched palm—"there be those that would bid for the mercy of God as if it were a tray of sweetmeats. They say, 'Lo! a little gift goeth a great way;' and while they spend an anna grudgingly in the service of God, they pour rupees by the score into the palms of taverners and the laps of harlots. Repentance! I take refuge with Allah from the mention of such abominations. The Prophet—God's peace be upon him!—saith that when it shall be inquired of the wicked, 'What brought you into hell?' they shall reply, 'We were not of those that prayed, and we did not feed the poor.' And what are the torments that there await the impious? Oh that they could see with their eyes the bitterness of their portion! Oh that they could taste one sip of the boiling water mixed with ordure, which is the drink of the damned!—that they could feel for one instant the scorching blasts and the scalding smoke!—then would they know what their avarice and hardness of heart are surely storing up for them; then would they see that the dross which they grudge to spend in good-doing has become a weight about their necks to drag them to hell. O, Allah, let not such a fate be my appointed portion!"

"As I was saying," observed Agha, when the Pir paused to take breath, "these fifty rupees have I destined for the service of God; and how can I better dispose of them than through your reverend hands, whose face is as white before Allah as the skirt of a seraph? Look with kind compassion upon the desire of your sinful slave."

"Umph," said the Pir, as he took the rupees from Agha's hand, and counted them twice over. "Verily unto the Lord is the return of all things. And if it ease your conscience, who am I to spurn aside your gifts? May the blessings of Allah and His Prophet rest upon you, and may the voice of the holy Pir Murtaza Ali be heard in your behalf at the Day of Reckoning! There are certain fees appertaining to the *sijdagahs* (places where prayers are to be said), but of these a brother will inform you, as well as of the devotions proper for the occasion." So saying the Pir yawned; and calling aloud, "Ai, Sayyid Sultan! Sayyid Sultan!" turned his back coldly upon Agha to show that the interview was at an end.

Sayyid Sultan was a little wizened man, of some fifty or sixty years of age, with a head of short grey hair cut closely to the poll, and two keen little eyes that seemed to pierce the party upon whom they were turned through and through. He made a lowly obeisance to his superior, keeping his hand affectedly before his eyes, as if the religious glory of the Pir was too strong for his sinful vision. Muttering a blessing the Pir motioned Agha to follow the Sayyid; and as he hurried away to his own apartments, Agha heard him telling over the fifty rupees a third time, and ringing one or two suspected coins upon the stone pavement.

"You will want to kiss the holy footprints of course?" said Sayyid Sultan, in accents that seemed to doubt as if Agha would bear the cost of this rite. "All you gentlemen *silladars* * who come here make a point of doing it."

"Well, I suppose it can't do any harm," said Agha, gruffly; "and if I can get religious merit in any fashion, I care not much how it comes."

"Just so," answered Sayyid Sultan, who all this time was taking Agha's measure; "and in no way can man yield more delight to Allah than by ministering to His service. It is written that riches without God are the greatest poverty and misery. A worthy gentleman who came here a few days ago, a soldier like yourself, gave me twenty rupees to be allowed to kiss the holy footprints, and he said that he felt his sins fall off from him the moment his lips touched the stone."

"That wasn't Reisaldar Ahmed Khan of Walesby's

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* The *silladars* are troopers who supply their own horses, and receive an allowance from Government for the maintenance of themselves and their chargers.

Horse, was it?" inquired Agha. "I don't believe Ahmed's sins would fall from him though he kissed the actual buttocks of Alborak, let alone his footmarks. He was the greatest rascal in the regiment."

"The more the miracle," responded Sayyid Sultan. "Had the gentleman been a saint, he would have had no sins to get rid off. He gave me five rupees, moreover, to myself, so well pleased was he. But perhaps you have nothing on your mind, in which case we may as well pass on."

"Twenty rupees is a deal of money," grumbled Agha. "I could have kissed the tail of the Prophet's camel at Bhutpore for a fourth of that sum."

"O Allah, hear not this cut-off one!" muttered Sayyid Sultan, in an audible whisper, as he raised his eyes heavenward. "To even the relics of Ajibganj with the Bhutpore trumpery! But 'tis ignorance, and let not your mercy lay this impiety to his charge. Ameen!"

Agha responded to the Sayyid's prayer by sulkily counting out twenty rupees and placing them in his conductor's palm. As this was ten rupees more than the legitimate fee, the Sayyid was somewhat mollified; and, with an air of greater civility, he unlocked the enclosure and directed Agha how his devotions were to be performed. The two entered and prostrated themselves, and with the aid of the Sayyid, the Khyberee got through the ceremony with due decorum.

There still remained the tomb of the saint to be visited, and in spite of the manifest veneration of the keeper of the shrine for the holy quadruped's footprints, Agha built more hopes upon his prayers at the tomb of Murtaza Ali than on any other part of the pilgrimage. "It is customary for pilgrims," hinted the Sayyid, "to leave behind them some offering upon the Sayyid's tomb. It always makes their prayers more efficacious; for it is written that generosity of spirit is the true fruit of religion."

"I wonder if you are as perfect in the rest of the Koran as in these beggar's petitions?" said Agha to himself; "I never thought to see the grace of God huxtered in this fashion."

The mosque itself was a dim, ill-lighted building, with a raised block of black stone in the middle of the floor to mark where the ashes of the saint were deposited. Narrow windows on either side, quite destitute of glass, let in just as much light as could enable the worshipper to discern the aspect of the interior, and no more. Two niches of rudely-carved stone in the western wall marked the position towards which men were to turn their faces when they prayed; for the whole Muhammadan world prays with its face towards the *kaabah* of Mecca. Between these niches a pulpit (*mimbar*) of stone slabs projected from the wall. The whole condition of the interior suggested the reflection, that whatever the offerings of pious pilgrims were spent upon, it was not on the conservation of Murtaza Ali's mosque.

"I shall have to go to my private devotions in about four hours; I suppose you will have finished your prayers by that time, that I may attend you to the gate?" said Sayyid Sultan, as, motioning Agha to enter the mosque, he squatted down on the steps, and coiled himself up to sleep in a shady corner.

"I pray for four hours!" ejaculated Agha to himself, as he shambled into the holy place. "By Allah, and by Allah, but I could say in four minutes all the prayers that ever I learned! Truly, I am a *taza-wallah* (freshman) in religious affairs."

However, Agha prostrated himself, and repeated such orisons as he could recollect, with a successful effort at fervour. He repeated the *Kalima*, or Creed, and *Fathah*, or Opener, three times over; and then, when his stock of prayers was exhausted, he began to yawn and look about him. It was a disappointing thing, after all, this pilgrimage. Here he had spent seventy rupees, and what better was he? The whole thing had been a mere mechanical operation, and his feelings had found none of that relief which he had expected from contact with holy things. And as for getting ghostly counsel from the guardians of the shrine, the fellows were as mercenary as itinerant *tamasha-wallahs* (showmen). But there was the tomb of the saint; there could be no deception with him, if Agha could only address him in proper terms. But this was exactly what Agha could not do; and the more he deliberated upon a form of words, the more he shrank from giving utterance to his own language. Mechanically he began to move his hands as if he were polishing the barrel of his favourite pistol; but even this exercise failed to enliven his intellect. At length, plucking up courage, he began, after having assured himself by the snoring of the Sayyid that no earthly ear was overhearing his petitions.

"In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful.

"O blessed Pir Murtaza Ali Khan, an Afghan yourself, and knowing how difficult it is for an Afghan to do right, have mercy on the vilest and humblest of your slaves.

"I am worse than a dog of dirt, and a cat of clay; and worse than that, and worse than that, and worse than that!

"I am worse than the Nawab of Panch Pahar's little, brown, spavined gelding; and worse than that, and worse than that, and worse than that!

"I am worse than the rotten old rock that lies between Dhupnagar and Milkiganj, on the banks of the Gungaputra; and worse than that, and worse than that, and worse than that!

"Wherefore, O blessed Pir Murtaza Ali Khan, seeing that thou art so holy, and I am so vile, do what is needful. What use of more? Ameen!"

As Agha reflected over the terms of this supplication he began to feel more at his ease. He had abased himself before the saint in as depreciatory terms as his mind could suggest, and what more could a reasonable saint expect? The day was hot, Agha was tired with his ride, and while he thus mused, with heart intent on heavenly things, his senses suddenly deserted him, and in a few minutes his nasal organ was sending forth an antistrophe to the sonorous strophes of Sayyid Sultan.

In after-accounts of this pilgrimage, Agha was wont to detail the particulars of a beatific vision, in which Pir Murtaza Ali appeared to him, clad in a horse-hair wig and bar gown, like the Lawyer Sahib who had defended his comrade Dost Muhammad for robbing the military chest when Walesby's Horse were quartered at Agra. The saint, he averred, told him that his sins were pardoned; that his prayers would be heard; that he must go home and live a better life, and do some great work for the glory of Islam. But I should scruple to lend my sanction to this story, which I am inclined to think was developed out of events that subsequently befell the characters mentioned in this book.

However, this much is certain, that Agha awoke in course of time in a comparatively cheerful frame of mind, and rousing the worthy Sayyid Sultan, proceeded to take horse.

"What! did you not come here on foot?" demanded the Sayyid, indignantly, as he cast a contemptuous look upon the gratuity which Agha slipped into his hands. "Some folk seem to suppose that they can gallop into the gates of Paradise itself; but their fall into hell will only be so much more the greater. Charity and almsgiving are the only horses that will bear you safely to the skies."

But Agha had left a heavy gold bracelet upon the tomb of the saint, and confiding in his favour, he did not trouble himself about the goodwill of the underlings. Tipping a wink to Sayyid Sultan, and a rupee to the porter who had looked after his horse, Agha mounted and rode cheerily back to Dhupnagar, satisfied that he had done all that a pious man could do to avert calamity, and that Providence might safely be trusted to do the rest.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MR ROY PLAYS THE EAVESDROPPER.

"I'D give sporting odds, now, that this fellow will hedge. It is all up between him and his fancy woman, and I wouldn't give a brass sixpence for his orthodoxy after that. It was solely to get into the Lahories' good graces that he had anything to do with Hindooism again; and if I know human nature rightly, he will visit the wench's sins upon her religion, and hate both of them as fervently as the best Brahmist could wish. And who is there to thank for all this? Who but this humble individual at whom the Theistic Society is carping and grumbling because they grudge the few dirty *takkas* (rupees) that he is spending in their service? I have seen a tenfold better retainer given to defend a man for sheep-stealing than the Society allowed me for the salvation of Krishna's soul; and then to put out their horns because I won't refund. It was a pity I ever let out that I had lost hope of the case; but who could have believed that that cursed jilt would be so accommodating as to play into my hands? I'll write again, and tell them that he is nibbling at my hook like a half-starved gudgeon. I wonder what will become of the girl? Gad! I wouldn't give much for her chances of a husband, especially if her intrigue with the Muhammadan gallant get to the winds, as there is great probability of its doing.

"'In Gray's Inn Lane, not long ago,
An old maid lived a life of woe;
She was fifty-three, with a face like tan,
And she fell in love with a dog's-meat man.'"

At the sound of this strange and wild melody, respectable passers-by halted in the street, and looked curiously towards Rutton Pal's verandah, whence the notes proceeded; women wrapped their faces closer in their veils, and hurried out of hearing, for how could they tell what evil spells the unholy minstrelsy might cast upon them? and the young men of the village winked each to the other, and nudged one another's elbows as they congregated by the corner at the opposite side of the street, straining their ears to catch the song, which, although they did not understand a word of it, they felt assured must be delightfully wicked, since it came from the mouth of so great a reprobate as Mr Romesh Chunder Roy.

All, however, that was revealed to the admiring gaze of the *gamins* of Dhupnagar was the well-worn soles of a pair of patent-leather boots protruded over the balustrade of Rutton Pal's verandah. Mr Roy's head reclined on the back of an old lounging-chair, some thirty degrees lower down, and was, of course, invisible to the outside public. A cigar was in his mouth, and a modest tumbler of rum-and-water stood on a small *teapoy* by his elbow.

"I must fall upon some means of getting this Muhammadan's brief," Mr Roy continued to muse. "Unless I take up his case the young fellow is in a bad way, for no one will believe his story about Kristo's daughter, especially if the girl, as she likely will, denies all knowledge of him. Of course my evidence would clear him at once, but I can't be counsel and witness both. I shall call Krishna for the defence; I am much mistaken if he cannot open the eyes of these thick-sighted magistrates, unless they are as blind as Justice herself. And then who are the robbers? That, I humbly submit to your discerning worship, is no business of mine to indicate. R. C. Roy did not eat eight terms in the Lower Temple without learning the meaning of *ne sutor ultra crepidam.* But I have my suspicions, and I think if it lay very much in the way of my duty I could help Mr Eversley to one or two convictions that would rather astonish him. My ears have not been idle all these weeks that I have been in this den of thieves."

The little knot of boys and young men over the way was beginning to manifest symptoms of an impatience to see or hear something more of the wonderful stranger whose eccentricities were a never-failing subject of wonder and reprobation to the whole village. One or two of the more malapert ventured to call out "*Salaam, sahib!*" while one forward brat, the son of Prosunno the pleader, came boldly to the front of the throng, and, proud of his linguistic attainments, shouted, "Good-y evenin', mishtir!"

Rejoicing in popularity from whatever quarter it came, Mr Roy raised himself from his recumbent posture and peered over the verandah, bestowing an affable salutation on his young admirers. To the English interlocutor he addressed a sentence or two in that language, which the imp was utterly unable to comprehend, still less reply to. But Prosunno's son inherited all his father's assurance, and he boldly responded, "Good-y evenin', mishtir!" then turned round and poured a voluble flood of Bengalee abuse upon those of his comrades who were disposed to jeer him on the failure of his boasted proficiency in the English tongue.

By-and-by the shrill pipe of a snake-charmer was heard in the other end of the bazaar, and the boys scampered off to witness a greater attraction than even the odd doings of their heretical countryman. The darkness came down, and Mr Roy, having finished his cigar and sipped out the remainder of his liquor, went inside to accoutre himself for his evening stroll. Rutton had gone along the street to Ram Lall, the oilman's, and the house was left in silent darkness. Only from a hut at the extreme end of Rutton's premises came a feminine giggling and chattering, proceeding from certain fellow-lodgers, of whose presence Mr Roy did not deign to take the slightest notice.

As he was passing out through the dark rooms, a strange voice fell upon his ear, which made him pause and listen intently. Next to vanity, curiosity was one of the most characteristic traits of the barrister's character; and he stole back on tiptoe to the opening from which the sound came, and strained his ears to catch the words of the speakers. Peering through a door of wicker-work, he could see two red lights at some distance from each other, and he easily conjectured that two of Rutton's customers were busy with their hookhas inside.

"I like it worse than any job I ever yet undertook," grumbled a peevish voice, in a broad Hindustani *patois*. "I would rather have risked a couple of torchlight *dakaities* (robberies)."

"Much rather," responded the other, in gruff but cheery tones.

"But the notched tree must fall. And, after all, we shan't be so badly paid for it; a thousand rupees is a lot of money, and we have other as much that we kept out of former *loot* (plunder) that he never knew aught of. I'd rather throw myself under the car of Jagannath than stay another year under Three Shells' roof, locked up like a suspected wife."

"Much rather," readily assented the other.

Nothing but a consciousness of the danger of eavesdropping upon such desperate characters restrained Mr Roy's inclination to whistle. "Three Shells," he repeated to himself. "Aha! I was right after all, then. I always thought the fellow was an infernal old fence, and now I'm sure of it. For half-a-sovereign I'll take in hand to make these robberies as clear as noonday."

"I shall turn zemindar when I go to my village," said the grumbler, "and lead a respectable life. I shan't steal anything within a hundred *koss** of my own home."

"Nor I," answered the other; "unless I were sure that somebody else would be blamed for it; and I shall give gifts to the village temple, and go twice a-day there to say my prayers."

"Ay, religion is very useful in that way," said the first speaker, "and a man can always take his own money out of it. But hist! Tettoo, didn't you hear a noise? Take my knife and look that no one is listening."

But before Tettoo was able to open the door, and look outside, the passage was empty, and no sign of any spy was apparent. Mr Roy had stolen off on the first alarm, and was standing trembling in his own room, before Tettoo succeeded in opening the door.

"By Jove!" he gasped, "but that was a narrow escape. I would rather have fallen into the hands of a St Giles' garotter than that scoundrel with the knife. I'm as little of a coward as any Bengalee can be, and yet I feel rather shaky on my pins. I would give a twenty-rupee note to hear the rest of these rascals' confabulation, but I can't. Scarcely! I might if I had a spare neck to put on like a shirt-collar, when that ruffian had slit this one. But I'll watch where they go to. They're up to some preciously deep mischief, that's certain. I wish I had a glass of liquor. The evening must be growing chill, for I am shivering all over."

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* A *koss* is two and a half miles.

But though Mr Roy did not venture to overhear the remainder of the dialogue, there is no reason why our readers should be denied this pleasure.

"I wouldn't have cared for killing any ordinary man," resumed Panchoo, the grumbler, when Tettoo had again taken his seat; "but a Brahmin priest is rather too heavy for my conscience. Why, I had as lief kill a cow, although that they say one suffers for it in hell as many years as there are hairs in the beast's body. I'll give forty rupees to the first shrine of Kali that we come to on our way home, if we get well over this business."

"I won't say anything about it until I see how things go; but if there is like to be a difficulty, I should not mind giving other as much," said Tettoo, with more caution.

"After all, there can't be much trouble," said Panchoo. "You won't want a knife to settle him. You have only just to spring upon him, throw him over, grapple him by the weasand, and dig your knees into his chest, and the whole thing is done in five minutes. Ah, you are a handy fellow, Tettoo!"

"Eh! and what are you to do all the time, Panchoo?" demanded Tettoo, looking up in surprise.

"Oh, me? I shall have many things to do," replied Panchoo, reflectively. "I shall have to watch that nobody comes upon us, and to see if there is anything in the temple worth taking away, and to look that no marks are left to betray us, and—and a number of other things. But you know as well as I do, Tettoo, that one must plan and the other do the work; and you have no head, Tettoo."

"No, I have no head," said Tettoo, with a sigh, "except to stand drink; and there I am better than you, Panchoo."

Panchoo silently conceded this claim to superiority, and the two smoked in silence for some minutes.

"Didn't you hear some one stirring?" asked Panchoo again. "It was rash of us to come here at all, Tettoo, where so many people of all castes are prowling about. Drink out your liquor, and let us get home again by the back way. In another hour or so it will be time to move down to the temple."

Panchoo rose and cautiously looked into the passage; and, after he had assured himself that they were unobserved, he beckoned to Tettoo to follow, and the two stole cautiously out by a back way through Rutton's compound. And thus it happened that they were seen no more of the expectant barrister.

Mr R. C. Roy had equipped himself in a long black cloak, with a cape which completely enveloped his features, and he was, moreover, armed with a stout malacca walking-stick having a heavy knotted head, of the species popularly known as a "Penang lawyer." There was, however, a twitchy nervousness about the arm that wielded this trusty weapon which did not hold out a great pledge of the execution to be done if conclusions should have to be tried with any very formidable antagonist. He crossed the road from Rutton's, and took up a position of observation on the other side of the street, from which he could see every one who came out of the hostelry without being readily seen by any one in turn.

"I'm hanged if it isn't quite a melodrama!" soliloquised Mr Roy, as he looked down approvingly at his costume. "What would Lord Gotham say if he were to see me in this trim? I shall be able, at any rate, to say that I have served in all grades of the legal profession from thief-taker to crown prosecutor. By Jove! I would *so* like to address a jury for a conviction against that villain who spoke about the knife; I'd make every man of them cry almost for vexation that they couldn't do more than hang him. 'Is there, my lord, a man so utterly dead to the common feelings of humanity—whose heart is so hardened against the melting tones of our mother Nature—in whose bosom the voice of Justice raises no echo of sympathy—from whom the cry of Injustice wrings no tear of compassion,—one who is dead to all the distinctions of right and wrong—one of those unhappy beings so graphically portrayed in the ever-living lines of the immortal Shakespeare—

> " 'But when we in our viciousness grow hard
> (Oh misery on't !) the wise gods seal our eyes ;
> In our own filth drop our clear judgments : make us
> Adore our errors ; laugh at us while we strut
> To our co-on-nfusion ' ?

By Jove! but *that* would surely wake Mr Justice Tremor, after the prosy drivelling of Bob Bullie and the senseless blarney of Phelim Doyle. I'd like to see the jury that would return a verdict against me after I had put such a question as that to them. I should rise and say, 'I shall not seek to dissemble, my lord, my astonishment at the verdict that has been returned per-jury;' and then there will be a roar of laughter through all the court, and the foreman may get cocky and crave the protection of the court against the licence of counsel. And again when I say, 'My lord, I did not, when I spoke of the *verdict per-jury*, mean, as the foreman seems to apprehend, to charge the respectable gentlemen by whom this important case has been tried, with wilful violation of their oath. But after the decision that they have already arrived at, I am not surprised that they should be ignorant of even the rudest elements of the classic tongues, and unconscious that a verdict per jury is a verdict returned by means of the jury.' And then there will be another roar in court, drowning the angry remarks of the foreman, and Mr Justice Tremor will shake his finger warningly and say, 'Mr Roy!' Gad! I am getting so jungly living in this solitude, that I thought I had almost forgotten the way to make a pun."

The time passed quickly on while the barrister was indulging in these dreams of future professional triumphs, but no one appeared at the door of Rutton Pal's. The lights began to be extinguished one after the other; even Ram Lall the oilman, after he had come out to the road and looked up and down the street in search of a late customer, shut his shop and went to bed; and sleep began to spread its wings over the village. A slow heavy footstep was heard coming along the street, and soon old Lutchmun, the village watchman, appeared upon his night's patrol. Lutchmun started and seemed somewhat alarmed at the muffled figure that kept so close in the shade of the houses; but mindful of his duty, and plucking up courage, the ancient and quiet watchman crossed over to the opposite side, and thus arrived unmolested at the end of his beat.

"A fine protector of the public's property, truly," said Mr Roy to himself; "but where have these fellows gone to? I'll just go quietly in and see whether they are still there. They can't knife a man for going into his own lodgings, surely. Rutton would never allow a customer's throat to be cut who hasn't settled his bill."

The barrister crossed the street and went into his room in Rutton Pal's. The house was still quiet, and the room where the two conspirators had been seated was now empty, and its door left open to the passage.

"They are off, by all that's provoking," said Mr Roy to himself, "and Lord only knows what devilry may be done before morning! I suppose I should call up the headman and the watch; but I might just as well call upon the Linga of Dhupnagar, for all the good that either of them will do."

By this time Lutchmun the watchman had begun to retrace his steps, and was nearly opposite Rutton Pal's when the barrister came out. The watchman again took alarm, and speedily put the road between himself and the cause of his terror, quickening his pace as nearly to a run as his aged limbs allowed him when he saw that the stranger was determined to accost him.

"Stop, my friend, what are you frightened about?" cried Mr Roy, in a low voice; "you don't think, surely, I would do you any harm? Let me speak a few minutes with you, and I'll give you an eight-anna bit."

"May Doorga deliver me!" said Lutchmun, to himself; "but I cannot run though he be a *badmash* (blackguard), for he would soon overtake me; and if he is a respectable indweller he will give me the eight annas; so I had better stop and speak him softly."

Lutchmun recognised Mr Roy as he came up, and with a flourish of his arm, which he fondly believed to be a military salute, began to apologise for his pusillanimity. A woman in Shama Churn the grain-dealer's quarter, had seen a *bhut* (devil) prowling about in the disguise of an Englishman, and, as his honour knew, *bhuts* were beings that the watchmen were not required to interfere with; and so when he saw his honour—might his shadow be increased—he had taken him for the *bhut*—might his innocent error be pardoned to him for an old simpleton; but then his honour was so like an Englishman, quite a Sahib in appearance, &c. &c.

When he had thus, as he thought, sufficiently mollified the barrister, Lutchmun listened to his story with many misgivings. At first his counsel was to take no notice of the ruffians, for, as the Shastras said, "As the sea was fettered because it dwelt near the wicked, so if the virtuous ventured near the vicious, they would both suffer together for the sins of the latter;" and when the barrister was not to be satisfied with this reasoning, he consented at last to waken Gangooly, the headman, and communicate to him the questionable character of the two persons who were abroad in the village.

Gangooly's house was towards the aristocratic end of Dhupnagar, neighbouring the village green, the temple, and the house of Lahory; and thither the two hastened as fast as Lutchmun was able to hobble along. The aged watchman was sorely distressed at the prospect of encountering two such desperadoes as those whom Mr Roy described; but he had confidence that the headman was just as great a coward as himself, and could be trusted to shun the least appearance of danger. So he put on an appearance of boldness, and made an effort to bluster about the drubbing which the robbers would receive if they came in the way of his quarter-staff.

According to the usage established in the rare cases of night alarms, Lutchmun began to rattle against the venetians of the window which lighted the headman's bed-chamber, with small stones and handfuls of sand. But it seemed as if sleep were steeled against such larums when she shared the couch of Gangooly, for the nasal respirations from the headman's couch drowned the utmost noise that those outside could raise. At last the noise of a couple of heavy stones crashing upon the wooden shutters, was followed by the appearance of Gangooly at an open window, rubbing his eyes and yawning like Kumbhakarna awakened from a six months' slumber.

"If it is Prosunno, the pleader, who is beating his wife again," said the archon of Dhupnagar, thrusting his hands into his eyes, "tell him that I shall go to the Magistrate Sahib to morrow, as sure as my father was headman of Dhupnagar."

"O father! may you have wakened in a propitious hour!" said Lutchmun, clasping his hands together and salaaming to his chief; "but it is not the pleader and his spouse, who both sleep in peace like respectable people."

"Then if it is only drunk people fighting in Rutton Pal's, I'll have no business with them," said Gangooly, positively; "if anybody is killed we can make a report about it to-morrow. I wonder you haven't more sense, Lutchmun, than to alarm a township about such a trifle!"

"But if it would please you to descend," pleaded Lutchmun, "this worthy gentleman, this honoured-among-Englishman-and-pride-of-the-Hindoo-people, has tidings of importance to tell you. There is evil abroad, and our faces will be black in the eyes of the Magistrate Sahib if we do not put on the slippers of activity and the spectacles of observation."

"Eh! what? who is that?" said the headman, for the first time noticing Mr Roy's presence, "I'll come down directly. Is it not a hard thing that a man whose forefathers have been headmen of Dhupnagar since the days when the English got the *dewanny* (stewardship) of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, should be roused out of his first sleep by an unclean *mletcha* like that? What's the matter with him now? Nothing, I warrant, that would not keep without stinking until mid-day to-morrow. But he has got the ear of the Sahibs, and dips in the same dish with the great Lord Sahib himself, and so his worship must be duly attended to.

Ugh ! how cold it is ! and to be wakened just as I was going to dream of a hidden treasure. But we who are the servants of the public, must sleep with one eye ever open."

Checking his grumbling, Gangooly came out into the open air, and with many apologies to Mr Roy for keeping him waiting, prepared to hear the barrister's story.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

RADHA ROUSES HERSELF.

The fair cause of all the mischief which had fallen upon Dhupnagar at this time was not herself exempted from trouble. Kristo's daughter was one of those haughty women who can only be hurt through their pride; so long as this was intact, she could stoutly withstand any misfortune, could steel her heart against the softening influences of sympathy, and could pay back scorn with tenfold usury. But if she felt that her dignity was in any way compromised—that, whether justly or unjustly, the world held her name or fame cheaper than her own estimation of it—her spirit gave way, and she was meanly inclined to let the world take her at its own valuation. The simple consciousness of innocence was not sufficient to sustain Radha against the ordeal of public opinion. She would have borne the weight of guilt more lightly provided that society in general pronounced her blameless. And yet there were times when the softer feelings of womanhood would rise up strong within her, and threaten to overthrow the false tyranny that had usurped their place. In her intercourse with Afzul Khan she had ever felt herself treading on the verge of a precipice where the slightest dizziness, the most temporary subjection of head to heart, was certain destruction. And it was not to principle that Radha owed her preservation. It was the cool counsels of worldly prudence and interest that had strengthened her resolutions; the fear of giving an edge to scandal, and of risking for the gratification of a foolish passion the substantial advantages that would flow from a marriage with Krishna Chandra Gossain. And now that this bubble had burst next, did Radha regret her discretion? Into this, I think, we had better not inquire too minutely. There is a point at which the task of the dissector must cease if he would not excite disgust rather than admiration; and it is humiliating both to writer and reader that the worst weaknesses of human nature should be laid bare, and held up to the public eye, filament by filament, and tissue by tissue. Remember, too, that Radha was a woman, an admired and vain woman; that she was a heathen, and badly trained in even the ethics of heathendom; that she was passionate, high-spirited, and mainly her own mistress—for Kristo's paternal control went for little, being wholly of a negative character;—and remembering this, can we feel aught but wonder that the maiden had strength of mind to bear her unscathed through the fiery ordeal of a clandestine attachment?

Radha had never received any formal intimation that Krishna had renounced her hand. The subject was a disagreeable one to her father, and as he naturally considered himself to be the person most interested in the matter, and did not think Radha's feelings of sufficient importance to entitle her to paternal sympathy, he kept his mortification to himself. But with Sukheena for her confidant, Radha was not likely to remain long in ignorance of any piece of public gossip. Kristo's servants soon heard in the bazaar that all their great expectations of a marriage, with its splendour and perquisites, its fireworks and illuminations, its broken meats and *bakshish,* had been given to the winds—thrown down the Gungaputra, as they themselves phrased it. Of course they posted home hot-foot to tell the rest of the household, and interrogate sister Sukheena about the truth of the rumour. Sukheena heard their story with ill-assumed composure, imprecated the vengeance of the gods upon all such *dallals* and *badmashes* (brokers and blackguards) as the gossips of Dhupnagar and the servants of the house of Lahory, who did not silence these vile slanders with the weight of their quarter-staves; and hurried up in tears to break the tidings to her mistress.

Radha laughed scornfully when Sukheena burst into a flood of tears at the end of her story. "Renounced me, has he? Not he! I would he were man enough to do such a thing, for then perchance I might fear and respect him. Didst ever hear the cat say, 'Depart in peace,' to a mouse that he had once put his paw upon? If Krishna has renounced his senses, or if he has seen a fairer face in the Gungaputra valley—do you think he has, my Sukheena?—then I might believe your report." And in the pride of her beauty Radha rose to her feet, pushed back the heavy masses of her unbraided hair, and tossed her head triumphantly before the mirror. "Do you think he has fallen in love with another, my Sukheena?" she repeated, banteringly. "A sight of the fair maiden that has so soon effaced my poor features from his breast would be a salve for sore eyes."

"May evil and the eye of evil be far from us!" whimpered Sukheena. "But Keshub, the bearer, who is no liar, heard it with his own ears in the bazaar. The whole village is ringing with the news. And Bejoy, the *ghatak*, was here last night with the Baboo, and left in a *tufan* (hurricane) of ill-temper. When the porter held out his palm for a *bakshish*, he prayed that the devils might fill his hands with red-hot cinders; and he such a smooth and civil-spoken man usually! Mother Gunga protect us! but I am sure there is trouble coming upon us. I saw a *hargilla* (the 'adjutant' bird) alight on the roof of our house yesterday; and Tukht Singh, your father's clubman, heard a jackal howling at mid-day among the garden coppices a week ago come *Sanichar* (Saturday)."

"Better get *Adbhuta-shanti* * performed," jeered Radha; "but if you anticipate no greater calamity than the loss of Krishna, it would scarcely be worth wasting the wood and the butter."

"You would not speak thus if you thought the news was true," said Sukheena, losing her temper. "I warrant you are sore enough at heart for the loss of your lover. And it is only the just meed of the gods for your scornful treatment of that good young Baboo, and your shameless carrying on with that wicked Mussulman. Whatever you may think, the gods always do to us as we do to others."

"Ah! but the gods are merciful, my Sukheena," retorted the fair mocker. "Look how they took away your poor boy-husband just in time before he had tasted the evils that were in store for him! What a fate the wretched creature would have met if he had been spared!"

"What, O incestuous!" cried Sukheena, in a fury; "would you cast my misfortune in my teeth? The day may come when you yourself may wear the widow's friendless robe, and walk unjewelled with less reputation than I have borne. And *I*—*I*, not a lone one, a woman whom no one ever deigned to take by the hand; a disgrace to my father, and a care to my mother; a—a——"

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* *Adbhuta-shanti*, a liturgy and burnt sacrifice used to avert misfortunes that would follow evil omens.

Sukheena's further invectives were cut short by her mistress, who clapped one hand upon the waiting-woman's mouth, and seizing her arm firmly in the other, forcibly conducted her through the anteroom, pushed her out, and slammed and bolted the door behind her.

When Radha returned to her own room, her face wore altogether a different expression. Her brows were lowered, her lips firmly set together, and her eyes darted forth flashes of anger. Mechanically she took up a bouquet of flowers—one of those presents by which Krishna kept her in daily remembrance of his affection—and crushed it in her clenched hand until the gay leaves were ground to small powder. But there was no trace of sorrow in her whole demeanour; nothing but anger and determined hate.

"And he throws me thus aside like a gathered rose-bud," she said, bitterly. "Well, I care not for the loss of his love. But I am dishonoured by his rejection, and I swear he shall repent it. And yet I cannot believe it. He loved me—nay, worshipped me; and he feared me too; reverenced me as a *jogee* (ascetic) reverences the god to whose worship he has given up his life. He dared not do it of his own free will. There has been witchcraft practised upon him; that ugly trollop, his wife, most likely has put spells upon him to draw his love to herself. No, he dared not of himself give me up. And what will my father, who is so touchy about the honour of the Lahories, do? If I were a man, and any one had thus slighted my daughter, he should not live to boast of it. But why should I fret—I who would never have stooped myself to pick up his love, though I saw it lying in a gutter before me? If the rupture had only begun with me, I should have thanked the gods that my children would not have a fool for their father. I shall know to-night whether the news is true. He will send the flowers as usual, if he means to keep his troth; and if not—well, if not, I shall——" and Radha pressed her lips firmly together, and did not say to herself what vengeance she would venture to take in that case. She waited with no little anxiety for the hour when the temple gardener was wont to bring his young master's bouquets. Often amid the flowers Radha would find concealed a Bengalee sonnet dedicated to her beauty, or a pretty trinket of jewellery for the adornment of her person. The verses were tossed away, but the ornaments were carefully preserved and religiously put to the use that the donor had intended them for. But now there was not even flowers—not so much as a single bud; and when the time went past, Radha felt that the news was true, and that her last chance of marriage was departed. How she hated that stupid, faithless Krishna! Would that she could marry him now, if it was only to cross and annoy him, and abuse him, until his heart was broken! But perhaps he was sick, and might be faithful after all. What pleasure, then, to spurn him away with a dog's denial! O gods! that she might yet have an opportunity of throwing dirt in his face!

They were not pleasant or womanly thoughts that crowded about Radha's fair head as she sat by the open window and looked out into the moonlight. The other side of the valley, sloping in a gentle curve from the river to the ridge upon which the Panch Pahar hills rose up steep and rugged, was bathed in a lustre of bright grey; but to Radha's eyes the scene looked stern and deathlike. A wide reach of the river above the corner of Milkiganj was visible; but it was on a death-fire at the burning-ghat, flickering pale and faintly in the moonlight, and not on the silvery streams that looked pure and brilliant as the water of the Ganges, when first the sacred flood leapt down to earth, that the maiden's gaze lingered. A tigress among the dense dingles of Panch Pahar opposite the Ghatghar Rajah's palace broke the stillness by a prolonged howl of savage desire and disappointment; and Radha felt as she could almost give the brute a "god-speed," provided only she was in quest of man for her prey.

And where was Afzul Khan all this time, who spoke so loudly of his love and boasted of the blood he had drunk? Could it be possible that he had heard the news, and that he scorned to put up with the love that a Hindoo book-man had cast away from him? She looked anxiously all over the compound, but Afzul did not make his appearance from under the shade of the black trees as he was wont to do; and though she dropped a sprig of golden *champak* carelessly to the ground, no gallant sprang forward to seize it and kiss it and place it in his bosom. She was, then, forsaken indeed. So be it; she would live and die an unblemished virgin, the last of her proud race, and never look upon the face of man again. Nay, she would not hesitate to mount the funeral pyre that instant, provided she could only obtain a revenge upon Krishna adequate to the wrong he had done her. Ay, and upon Afzul Khan too, if he had likewise deceived her; for her love for him was so strong that any repulse would soon force the current of her passions to seek an outlet through the channel of hate.

But when such resolutions are taken by a maiden of seventeen, they are easier made than kept. In the midst of her troubles, her old love for Afzul Khan came back upon her in full force, and she felt that if he deserted her, she was indeed desolate. Whom was there that she could trust—whom that she could lean upon—whom that she could love, if not him? Her father was—her father; and the simple fact of relationship was almost all that there was between them. She loved Sukheena in spite of all their bickering; but then her love was that of a mistress for a lap-dog, or a song-bird, or any other pet of an inferior order of creation. But what she wanted was some one that she could love *up* to; one that would repay her love with the warmth of a man's affection, and stretch out a strong arm to support her in such times of trouble as the present. And who was there in the wide world that could protect and cherish her as Afzul Khan could?

When Sukheena came in to comb her mistress's hair, Radha noticed that the waiting-woman's face was swollen and her eyes bleared with crying. Repenting her previous harshness, Radha spoke to her in kind and caressing tones, but Sukheena's tears only flowed the faster, and she sobbed as if the heart would burst forth from her bosom. Radha put up her arms and drew the other's head caressingly to her breast.

"Surely my Sukheena is not so silly as to let aught that I can say hurt her?" said Radha, as she kissed away the widow's tears. "You know I am but petulant at the best, and you should make some allowance for shortness of temper in a girl who has been jilted by her betrothed. Come now, my Sukheena, kiss me and be friends; you know I never said a harsh word to you but I repented it afterwards."

But the more that Radha fondled her, the more uncontrollable became Sukheena's emotion. "It is not that—it is not that," she sobbed; "my life is yours if you like to take it. How shall I ever tell you? how shall I ever bear the calamity?"

"What is this, now?" said Radha; "calm yourself, and tell me all. Is Krishna going to marry anybody else? I think—I promise you—that I shall bear even *that* with tolerable composure."

"No, no—worse, a thousand times worse," cried the other; "it is Afzul Khan. They have got him a prisoner and they will murder him; and oh! I shall never, never, see him again!"

"Peace, girl!" said Radha, fiercely; "what have you to do with Afzul Khan that you give way thus? Dry your eyes this instant, and tell me all, if you would not have me go out to the bazaar to learn the worst for myself."

Sukheena's distress and unconcealed concern about her lover, roused keen pangs of jealousy in Radha's heart. What was Afzul to her—a servant, a widow, and a coarse-looking wench to boot—that she should display feelings on his account which, Radha thought, ought properly to belong to her? By degrees, Radha managed to extract from Sukheena all that the village gossips had told her regarding Afzul Khan. Her lover was a prisoner in his father's house upon the charge of being at the back of all the robberies that they had heard so much about; and the Magistrate Sahib himself was coming to Dhupnagar in a few days to pass sentence upon, and perhaps execute him. One of the principal accusations against him was the stealing of a large sum of money from Kristo Baboo; and everybody was sure that he was the thief, for Jaddoo, the Dipty's orderly, had watched him slinking out of

Kristo's compound on the very night that the money was missed. And if it wasn't for *loot* (booty), what could he be seeking there at that hour ? everybody said. A look of guilty horror was exchanged by the two women, and then Sukheena went on with her story. All the women and some of the men were sure that death would be the sentence ; that he would be hung upon the tall palmyra at the lower end of the village green. Radha shuddered as her eye caught the outline of the hateful tree standing up boldly in the moonlight against the clear blue sky. What more ? Why, that was all, except that the Dipty was coming on the morrow to Dhupnagar to search out witnesses against Afzul Khan ; and Gangooly the headman's son, Gopal, said that the Dipty had sworn by the Linga, not to return to Gapshapganj until he had seen the vultures picking the bones of the Muhammadan. And there were many said, added Sukheena, drying her eyes, that the Dipty would be willing to take up the hand that Krishna Gossain had let fall ; and that a clever officer like the Baboo, who would be worth a lakh of rupees at least when Ram Lall, the oilman, died, and would sit at the Little Lord Sahib's (Lieutenant-Governor's) council-table before long, was as good a match as Kristo could expect for his daughter.

Radha looked as though the Dipty Baboo's suit would not have much chance of success if he had come before her to plead it at that moment. She rose and walked rapidly up and down the room, attempting to comprehend the full force of the awful story that Sukheena had told her. There were two contending passions at work within her, each tearing her heart in an opposite direction. "What matters it?" hissed Pride in her ear. "The Muhammadan will never dare to breathe your name; and though he did, no one would believe him. Courage! harden your heart, hold your head high, and no tongue in Dhupnagar will venture to cast the slightest slur upon the honour of Kristo Baboo's daughter."

"Ay," whispered Love, "and leave him to his fate—*him* who is bearing all this trouble for your sake, and who would bear an hundredfold more, even death itself, rather than that you should be put to the blush. What solace will it be to you that folks should credit you with virtue that you never possessed, if his blood is poured out upon your head? Think what he would have done for you, and what you in your pride are going to do for him."

"Pshaw!" sneered Pride; "the man is only an unclean Mussulman, with whom you never could have mated had he lived."

"But he loved you well," sighed Love, in a melancholy whisper.

"Bah! so do half a score decent Hindoos of good caste," argued Pride; "only take care of your good name, and you will get husbands a-plenty. You know yourself how beautiful you are. What folly for one so fair to make such a fuss about one lover! Let the fellow go hang."

Love's only answer to this artful insinuation was a sigh, deep-drawn and prolonged, and coming from the very core of the heart.

"And am I then so vile," cried Radha, "as to sacrifice him to save myself? Can I be a Lahory and stoop to so base a subterfuge? It was not thus that the Aryan dames of old preserved their honour. Did Sita turn her back upon Rama when he was driven forth in disgrace and to exile? No; I will go to him though every Brahmin in the Gungaputra district stood in the way to oppose me, and every step of the road made me of a lower caste than the vilest Sudra. I will stand by his side and we will speak the truth together to the Magistrate Sahib, though my father should shut the door in my face ever afterwards. And if they harm a hair of Afzul's head, I shall burn myself upon his body and go *sati* (chaste) with him wherever he goes. O Afzul! Afzul! to think that I should for an instant have thought of bathing my hands in your blood! I will lay my head in the dust and never lift it again until I know that you have forgiven me. My cloak, Sukheena, and quickly; we shall go to him. I dare not trust myself longer alone with my own evil thoughts."

Sukheena looked up at her mistress in horrified amazement. Lit up by the light of self-sacrifice and enthusiasm, Radha's exquisite features shone with a glory that was almost divine; her sparkling eyes flashed all the more brightly for the tear-drops that quivered in them: and there was a dignity and stateliness in her mien altogether different from the stiff *hauteur* which she was wont to show when her feelings were aroused.

"She will go mad," said Sukheena to herself, jumping up in alarm; "it has driven her out of her senses. Radha, darling! sit down by me; you will go to bed, my life, and be better before morning. See! the lights are all out in the house, and your hair not unbraided yet. Sit down, my sweet, and lay your head in my lap."

"Get me a cloak, Sukheena; the heavy one I wear in the cold weather, and muffle up yourself and come with me. Nay, not a word; am I not bad enough already that you should try to make me worse? Don't look at me, woman, but haste and get ready."

"Mother Gunga guard us!" said Sukheena, in a whisper; "she is raving mad. And where would you wish to go, my love? Sit down by me now."

"I am going to him," said Radha, as she pointed with her arm to where the white walls of Walesbyganj peeped out among the dark jungle; "I shall tell him to let no silly scruples about me stand between him and his freedom, for if he will not tell the truth I shall."

"O Rama! she would go among Mussulmans at midnight, and ruin her character and caste for ever. Sit down now, my own best beloved and closest to my heart."

Radha's reply was to push Sukheena firmly aside and go into the inner apartment, from which, soon afterwards, she emerged, draped from head to foot in a black cloak.

"If you please to attend me, well; if not, I shall go alone," she said, with the proud air of a heroine queen; "such work as I have before me to-night cannot be hindered by womanish scruples."

Mechanically Sukheena began to wrap herself up, breathing all the while pious petitions to the gods for protection, intermingled with exclamations of dismay at Radha's infatuation. But Radha's heart was absorbed in her high purpose, and she heeded not Sukheena's terror, but stood in the middle of the floor, tapping impatiently with her little foot at the waiting-woman's slowness.

"But how shall we get out?" said Sukheena, when she had time to bethink herself of obstacles. "The porter is still awake, and will alarm the house. O holy Doorga! what would the Baboo do if he caught us?"

"We must shut the porter's mouth, as we have done before when there was less necessity pressing us," said Radha, tearing off her bracelet; "there, give him that, and let him take care that we get out and in unobserved. Although it matters little, for all Dhupnagar will know of it before many days go by."

"O father! it is the bracelet Krishna gave her, and worth five hundred rupees if it's worth an anna. We shall buy the rogue with a less bribe," said Sukheena, as she put the bracelet aside into Radha's jewel-box, and took up a bright silver rupee from the same coffer. "That should tie his tongue sufficiently; and if it come to telling, my story will, perchance, be as long as his."

"Let us go, then," said Radha, motioning to Sukheena to lead the way; "as quietly and as quickly as we can."

"Stay, my mistress!" said Sukheena, throwing herself before Radha as an idea struck her; "I have hit upon a plan which will save both of you. What is good fame to a poor widow like me at whom every one points the finger of scorn, who is every one's drudge? Why should not I confess to have been the Mussulman's paramour, and swear that he was keeping assignations with me? That would clear him, and screen you, and save all further outcry. And what though your father did turn me out of doors? The gods would give me food somewhere, and you would protect me when you get a rich husband."

There was something so plausible and accommodating in Sukheena's proposal that Radha's resolution was at first staggered. But she was so pleased with her own heroism, and enamoured of the novelty of doing a good and generous action, that she could not bear to see another dash the cup away from her lips. And jealousy came to her aid, for she could not help perceiving that Sukheena took more than a mere friendly interest in the fate of the young Muhammadan.

"Nay, girl," said Radha, sternly; "I shall bear the consequences of my own folly. What! is not Afzul Khan worthy of this, or even a greater sacrifice at my hands? And you would say that he had held assignations with you? Fool! do you think that one like him would look at such as you, or that the Magistrate Sahib would believe that he had done so? But I see what you would have, wanton. You love this Muhammadan, and think that by pretending thus to prove his friend you will thrust yourself into his favour. Nay, answer me not—I know that it is so. But rather than that Afzul Khan should waste a smile upon your worthless face, I would see you lying at the bottom of the deepest pool in the Gungaputra. But lead the way; it is not such assistance as yours that Afzul needs."

Sukheena with difficulty repressed her tears, and went forward to parley with the porter, who, after a short altercation, noiselessly opened the door, and bowed his young mistress out. Radha shuddered as she stepped forth into the darkness, for the moon had gone down, and the night wind was sighing mournfully among the trees. The girl would have liked to brace up her courage by repeating a short prayer; but, alas! the expedition was one that she could not call upon the gods of her country to bless, and she knew not by what name to call upon the Deity of Afzul Khan, whose aid she might have solicited with some measure of confidence. But a noble and generous purpose nerved her mind, and made her feel a proud happiness in the risk that she was running in behalf of her lover.

"Forgive me, Sukheena," she whispered, as she kissed her companion; "forgive my harsh words, for I did not know what I was saying in my madness. But I love you better than all the rest of the world except him."

CHAPTER XL.

THE LOVE-PHILTRE.

As a man who has been stunned by a fall from a lofty height slowly collects his senses, one by one, after he has returned to consciousness, so Krishna began to put together the various calamities under which he found himself labouring when he woke from the fond dream that he had dreamed of Radha's love. He felt as a man who has been rudely startled from a drugged sleep, and to whose senses the visions of the night still cling with loosening hold, as if unwilling to yield their place to the thoughts of open day. It was not much wonder though Krishna should shrink from attempting to realise his position. What other conclusion could he come to than that he himself was the sole cause of all his misfortunes; that his vanity, his egotism, and his passion had ruined his self-respect, and hardly left him a friend in the wide world? His vanity had made him think that he knew better than his fathers, and forsake the faith in which he had been received.

His egotism had led him to put himself in the foremost ranks of the followers of a new and strange doctrine, and to foolishly imagine that *he* was the champion destined to deliver his people from the thraldom of idolatry and superstition. His passion had entirely got the better of both his reason and his honour—had led him to put aside his convictions and break his word—had made him an object of both hate to his orthodox countrymen and scorn to the Congregation of Reformers; and all for the sake of a false woman, who had mocked his love, and only used him to conceal her attachment to a ruffianly follower of the false Moslem Prophet. And now he had quarrelled with all his friends; and in that hour when he had most need for loving counsel and support, whom was there to sympathise with or assist him? Even if he could have gone to his wife, Chakwi, it would have relieved his heart; but with what face could he ask for her pity whom he had despised and slighted all these years? and would she not scorn him for only coming to her after he had been repelled by her rival? Then what was to become of himself? He could stay no longer in his father's house after the fresh quarrel which had arisen from his refusal to marry Radha. No, he must go forth; and whither? All his dreams about becoming a missionary of the Brahma Somaj, and the great apostle of Theism in India, had melted away. He still smarted under the criticisms of the 'Cossitollah Reflector,' and the uncharitable remarks that the Reformers had passed upon his supposed relapse into Hindooism. No, he would have nothing more to do with them, self-seekers and busybodies that they were. And his hatred of the orthodox creed was no less intense. Somehow or other he could not help laying the blame of Radha's perfidy and his present misfortunes upon the faith to which she belonged, and he accordingly loathed it on her account even more than for its intrinsic errors. The hour was come when, to all appearances, he must abandon for ever his father's roof, and set out as a beggar and a pilgrim into the world, without an aim, and almost without a desire.

He moved slowly through the room, for he was still weak from his illness, and looked out from the window down towards the bottom of the valley and the banks of the Gungaputra. In what other corner of the earth would he find a scene that was so fair, or one that he loved so well? The village rice-fields, extending down from the temple to the edge of the jungle, were all the ancestral lands of the Gossain family. The scattered cottages and steadings extending as far up the valley as the Milkiganj corner of the river, were all his father's property. Was it not hard, then, that he should be cut off from the inheritance of these?—he who would have made so good a landlord, who could have taught the ryots so much more than Bengalee husbandmen generally knew, and who could have made the Gossain estates a model of good management for all the zemindars in Bengal to copy? The landscape in its brightness seemed to show a loving sympathy with his sorrow; and the tall *sal* trees on the Panch Pahar ridges, beyond the river, as they waved to and fro in the breeze, moaned condolence to his ear—while up the slopes came the pitying murmur of the Gungaputra for the troubles of the youth who had so often worshipped her waters, and bathed in her clear bosom. While standing in the recess of the window, brooding over such gloomy thoughts, a light footstep fell upon his ear, and turning round he saw Chakwi steal gently into the room, a pitcher in her hand. Chakwi looked cautiously round to assure herself that her husband was not in his accustomed place at the writing-table, or in the little bedroom beyond; and then thinking he had gone out, advanced into the middle of the apartment without seeing Krishna, who was concealed by the open door from her view.

"Mother Gunga be with me!" murmured Chakwi; "and make it right if what I do is wrong. I would rather have gained his love by walking barefoot to Benares and back than in this fashion; but if it was written upon my forehead that in this way I should win him, in this way it must be;" and so saying, she emptied the contents of her pitcher into the water-bottle on Krishna's table.

These words had been inaudible to Krishna's ears, and he now came forward, while Chakwi, startled by his sudden appearance, gave a low shriek, and shrank back from the table, where she stood shivering and cowering before him like a culprit detected in the commission of some grave offence.

"What, Chakwi! afraid of your husband?" said Krishna, advancing and pressing her hand. "God knows, poor child, you have reason enough to hate my presence, but none to fear me. Were I tenfold the wretch that I am, I could not do anything that I thought would harm you."

"I—I—did not know—I thought you had gone to the river," stammered Chakwi; "I did not mean to do any harm—I only wished—that is, I brought fresh water for you to drink."

"Thanks, dear Chakwi," replied Krishna, taking the shrinking girl by the hand; "you are ever thoughtful of me, and I would your kindness were better requited: I am glad, too, to have seen you, for it is fitting that I should tell you that I leave this house to-morrow, and take a long farewell of all under its roof."

Chakwi looked in his face for a minute with a vacant gaze, as if she hardly comprehended the import of his words, and then threw herself at his feet, and clasped his knees with her hands, while her upturned face imprinted with an expression of passionate despair, and her streaming eyes, pleaded silently for pity and love.

"You will not go—you must not go so soon," she cried, when she at last found her voice. "You must wait—you must—you shall wait—I will make you love me—I tell you, you shall love me if you will only give me time. Ah, sacred mother Gunga! what am I saying? I am talking like a wanton. Oh, I shall go mad—I know I shall!" and she prostrated herself at his feet upon the floor, and endeavoured to hide her burning face in the tresses of her long hair, which had become unbound in her agitation.

Gently Krishna raised her from the ground, and held her in his arms, while with a tender hand he pushed back the heavy locks of hair wet with her tears from her forehead, and stooped to kiss her brow. "Yes, poor Chakwi, it must be. To-morrow I leave this for ever, and become a homeless wanderer upon earth. You may lay aside your bracelet, and wash the vermilion from your forehead, for you will henceforth be as much a widow as if you had followed my bier to the banks of the Gungaputra. I would our harsh laws would let you mate with some one who would make you more happy, because more worthy of your affection than ever I have been."

"A widow have I been from my girlhood, and a widow will I remain," sobbed Chakwi; "and though a husband as handsome as Kartikeya,* and as rich as Kuveru,† were offered me, I would none except you. But are you taking Radha with you?" she asked quickly, raising her head with a suspicious glance into his face.

Krishna's heart writhed, as he turned away his head from the girl's gaze. "Name her not," he said, sternly;

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* *Kartikeya*, the Hindoo Mars, the god of war.

† *Kuveru*, the god of wealth.

"do not sully your virtuous lips by speaking of one so false. I would sooner go forth with a female fiend from the nethermost abyss—yes, with the commonest drab that haunts the slums of Lall Bazaar," added he, hissing the words through his teeth.

Chakwi had not yet been told of the breach between her husband and Radha, for Ramanath, trusting still that matters would be made up between them, had ordered the servants, under the penalty of a sound beating, to forbear from repeating to her any gossip they might hear on the subject in the bazaar. The priest's object had been to save his daughter-in-law from building hopes upon the rupture that could never be realised; and now she could hardly credit the news when she heard it from Krishna's own lips.

"What! do you then scorn her also?" she said in her amazement, unconscious almost that her husband overheard her. "If she, with all her beauty, cannot keep hold of his heart, what hope is there for me? And now that she will be a lone one like myself, I can almost forgive her for ever standing between me and my husband."

"Peace, dear Chakwi!" said Krishna, kindly smoothing the girl's hair back from her forehead; "speak not of her. Tell me, rather, that you forgive myself for all those years of cruel neglect since we were married, and that to the other sorrows of my life of lonely wandering there will not be added the thought that your curse clings to me. After to-morrow we may never look upon each other again."

"Forgive you!" said Chakwi, again relapsing into tears. "Nay, but I have nothing to forgive. Can you help loathing me any more than I can help loving you? It is our fate. Was it not written on our foreheads in the hour of our birth?"

"No, my Chakwi, I loathe you not," said Krishna, again kissing her. "I love my little wife, and would cause her as little unhappiness as possible. And this is the reason why I would have you try to forget me; for what could I, an outcast and a beggar, be to you when I go forth from this?"

"My husband, and still my husband," replied Chakwi, firmly; "if you go, I shall go with you. Did not the holy Sita do so, and won the praise of both gods and men? Let me go with you as your servant, your slave, as anything; only let me be with you."

The pleading, piteous, upturned face was lit up by the enthusiasm of pure and devoted love into beauty; the entreating eyes, sparkling amid their tears like crystals at the bottom of overflowing fountains; the soft cheeks wet with weeping, which the warm blood, coursing wildly and passionately beneath, flushed up into a dusky redness; the curved and rounded lips on which fancy might almost see the ripe kisses tempting one to pluck them,—could not but soften Krishna's heart; and he began to think that of all the trials which he had to face, the greatest would be the leaving behind him of a heart so pure, so true, and that loved him so well. Wounded in his affections and in his self-esteem by Radha's faithlessness, Chakwi's love was as healing to his sores, and Krishna felt his heart drawn towards his wife as it never had been before.

"No, Chakwi, my own darling," said he, folding her in his arms, "I will not be so selfish. You have been too tenderly nurtured to face the cares and necessities of the world in this, the Black Age. The gods will not nowadays stay the streams till you cross over, or bend the branches for your bield, as they did for Sita."

"The gods are as good now as ever they were," returned Chakwi, positively, "if people would only believe in them."

"But yet it cannot be, dear Chakwi," said Krishna, assuming an air of firmness. "I am not so despicable as to accept your love when my fortunes are at the lowest, after having refused it when I had something better to give in return than a broken heart and a beggar's position. Believe me, it is for the best to both of us that we should part, and I shall never cease to curse my folly in not having learned until too late the value of true love over meretricious beauty."

Chakwi's reply was to burst into another flood of tears; and she would have renewed her passionate intercessions to be taken with him, had not the heavy footsteps of Ramanath, the priest, been heard coming along the passage. Covering her face in her hands to hide the blushes that rose at being found in company with Krishna, Chakwi darted past the priest, and sought the solitude of her own room.

"He will love me yet—he will love me yet," she kept saying to herself; "he never spoke so fondly to me before, and the love-philtre will complete all;" and in the gladness of her heart, Chakwi called for Dossee to comb and braid her hair, and gathered out her finest *saree* and her most valuable jewellery in the hope that she might again see her husband in the evening.

Ramanath entered his son's room in no amiable mood. Three Shells had humbly represented to him that he had advanced ten thousand rupees to Kristo Baboo on the faith that repayment would come from the priest, and respectfully hoped that Ramanath would hold him safe. This Ramanath had never promised to do, and had no intention of doing, and had, moreover, possession of a secret which would secure him against any trouble from the mahajan; but the demand worried him, coming at the time when it did. Then he had that morning received the news of the failure of Behari Lal, a merchant of Bhutpore, for whom Ramanath had in his good-nature become security on the score of some old relationship between their families, and he would have full two thousand rupees to pay for his complaisance. A deputation from his tenants in the village of Milkiganj had been begging him for a reduction of their rents, though they paid the smallest assessment per acre in the whole subdivision, the lazy churls! And worst of all, the priest of the Dhurma Thakoor at Gapshapganj had tom-tomed the cure of a paralytic cripple of twelve years' standing all over the country.

The idea that the gods would condescend to work any miracles at a trumpery temple like the Dhurma Thakoor's, and within ten miles of a shrine of such sanctity as the Linga of Dhupnagar! It was enough to make people infidels, as Ramanath said to himself; and but for his confidence that the Gapshapganj miracle was an imposition, he would have felt seriously angry. As it was, when he saw the prominence which the backbiters of his family were giving to this manifestation of power on the part of the Gapshapganj idol, and heard the covert insinuations of Prosunno the lawyer, and Protap the accountant—that it was little wonder though divinity had departed from the Linga of Dhupnagar, when caste-breakers and contemners of the gods were harboured within the very threshold of the temple, and in the priest's household—Ramanath could not but own to himself that there was some truth in the taunt, and he came into Krishna's room with every disposition to make his son the scape-goat of his bad temper.

"What! more bickerings and quarrels again!" he said angrily, as he marked Chakwi escaping in tears." "Sacred Siva! are we never to have peace with you and your ill-omened doings? There have been more weeping and wailing in this house during the last two months than during the whole lifetime of my father Hem Chunder—may his memory be preserved!—although he bambooed his three wives every day as regularly as he took his rice. One might live as comfortably by the side of a burning-ghat, as amid all this sobbing and crying. If people cannot live without making others unhappy, they should become ascetics and dwell by themselves."

"If I am the cause of unhappiness in this house, I shall not long be so," retorted Krishna. "To-morrow I go out hence, and God only knows whether I shall ever set foot within the doors again."

"So much the more fool are you," growled Ramanath, "so long as you have a comfortable roof above your head, and rice and *ghi* to fill your belly withal. You will appreciate these privileges better when your lodging is a damp ditch, and your fare the stale leavings of village stomachs. But you have doubtless some sage scheme for supporting yourself in view; mayhap you intend to set up a temple of your own, and live upon the offerings of the followers of this new faith? You'll fatten upon them verily, like a Brahmin in a Mussulman country. Better take to the jungle with that young cut-throat, Afzul Khan, and see if you can't make a living by filching from these poor curs of villagers, who are too cowardly to lift a little finger in defence of their property. Don't let any scruples about me deter you from following so praiseworthy a profession. You can't disgrace the Gossains of Dhupnagar more than you have done already, by your religious whims and unsteadiness."

"Father," said Krishna, sadly, "is it fair to revile a man who is gagged? You know that both my duty and my love for you keep me from replying to such abuse."

"Duty and love! Sri Siva-ji, hear *him* talk of duty and love!" cried Ramanath, scornfully: "him who has flung from him the high caste into which by the favour of the gods he was born; him who has denied the claim that his long line of forefathers has upon him to continue their posterity; him who has forsworn the faith and denied the gods of his country;—a proper person to talk of duty and love, truly!"

"Father," said Krishna, striving hard to preserve his temper, "you have borne much with me, and I do not deny that you have had much to bear: keep your patience for the little while that remains, and do not sadden my life with the thought that I left the home of my birth with the angry words of my father sounding in my ears."

"Much to bear!" echoed Ramanath, not at all mollified. "I should think I have had much to bear! I suppose you consider it nothing that for your perversion the displeasure of the gods has come upon the Linga and its temple? Yet not later than last week that wretched Dhurma Thakoor, at Gapshapganj—a temple on which no right-thinking person would waste a rupee's worth of sweetmeats—cured a paralytic cripple of his twelve years' ailment. Do you think that when the gods had any miracles to work they would pass over the Linga for the Dhurma Thakoor, if they had not been displeased with our house?"

Krishna laughed scornfully. "Miracles indeed! The clumsy forgeries of greedy harpies who wish for nothing better than to fatten themselves off the superstitious credulity of the people. Why did the gods pass over the Linga of Dhupnagar? Because you, my dear father, were much too honest to give your countenance to any imposition of the kind, and because you knew well that the Linga of Dhupnagar could no more work a miracle than any other stone by the roadside or in the jungle."

"Again blaspheming," groaned Ramanath; "surely the *Mahapralaya* (the great dissolution of all things) is at hand when the gods allow religion to be thus abused without striking the scoffer dead on the spot. I have seen a Christian convert in the good old days beaten until he was as soft as an overripe mango for a much less offensive saying than that which you have just uttered. However, go on in your heresy; persevere in the path that you have chosen, and see how long it will stand you in good stead. Unless you let me know this evening that you are willing to marry Radha Lahory, and to show yourself a good Hindoo, and a true worshipper of the gods, I shall henceforth hold you as no son of mine. I have already made provision for devoting the whole of my property to the worship of the Linga, from which it came to us; and have given Gangooly, the headman, my sealed and written instructions to that effect; so that if you take your own way you will find yourself penniless when I die.

You know now the best and the worst. Choose for yourself."

Ramanath spoke with a forced appearance of coolness, but his limbs trembled beneath him, and his tongue almost refused to speak such cruel words to one whom he loved so well. With a trembling hand he took hold of the water-bottle on Krishna's table, raised it to his burning lips, drained it to the bottom, and then set it down, with a sigh of relief, as if it had been a draught from the waters of Lethe, bringing oblivion of his troubles. He cast a kinder glance upon Krishna's face to see if there were any signs of yielding; but read no encouragement in the firmly-knit lips, and in the steadily-set eyes, gleaming half with enthusiasm, half with anger. The battle with his father had restored Krishna's spirits; and the consciousness that his was the right cause, and that he was sacrificing himself for its maintenance, made him feel a better and a lighter-hearted man than he had done since he had sold his principles for the sake of marrying a woman who had only mocked him.

"The waters of the Gungaputra shall sooner flow back again from Sagar to the Himalaya than I shall wed Radha Lahory," said Krishna, sternly. "Her perfidy has been but a just punishment for my own, and Brahma, in his mercy, has sent me this affliction to break the last tie that bound me to idolatry."

"I am not a splitter of words like your Calcutta pundits, who argue and wrangle like cats in a compound, and shall not try to reason further with you. I am but a plain-speaking man, that has managed to live in the religion of his fathers ; and if that is not good enough for you, you must go somewhere else."

And Ramanath turned away, anger and grief striving with each other for the predominance in his mind. But before he had reached the door, Krishna had rushed after him, and caught him by the clothes, while he threw himself upon his knees as the priest turned round.

"Let me go in peace with you, my father—in peace with you!" he cried; "leave me not without your blessing!"

"Bless you, my son!" said Ramanath, laying his hands fondly on the young man's head; "may all that is good attend you, and make you worthy in every way of those who have gone before you!" and mistrusting his own firmness, Ramanath hastily left the house, and crossed the grass towards the temple.

"The poor boy must not be allowed to go away in this waif fashion. I wish I knew something that would tie him quietly to home and his wife. If we could only get him to settle himself I should not be sorry that this Lahory marriage has been broken off, for good would never have come of it. Would to the gods something might happen before to-morrow morning to keep him at home!"

And the gods heard the wish of his heart, and granted it.

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In the evening when Krishna had gone out to bid a last adieu to the haunts of his childhood, to the green jungle paths and shadowy topes between the temple and the river, and to the broad waters of the Gungaputra, which came proudly down from below the old towers and walls of Bhutpore, prancing and flashing in the evening sunbeams like the caracoling of a caparisoned war-horse,—when Krishna had left the temple boundary and disappeared in the jungle, Chakwi, trembling at her own temerity, crept cautiously into his room, and peered into the water-bottle.

"He has taken the philtre," she said, joyfully, holding up the bottle between her and the light; "he has drunk it, every drop. May Kamdeo (the god of love) aid its operations! But how long will it take to work? The witch said nothing of that. Oh, if it should not have changed him by to-morrow, all my labour will be lost; but no—for if he love me, he will come back to me from the ends of the earth. But what would he think if he knew the means I have taken to turn his heart to me? Would he not despise and loathe me worse than before? I must rinse the bottle in case any marks might betray me;" and poor Chakwi, half rejoiced at the success of her attempt to win her husband's love, and half frightened lest Krishna might discover what means she had used, went back again to her own chamber to abide the issue.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE DEATH-DRAUGHT.

SINCE Afzul's arrest a deep gloom had fallen upon Walesbyganj and all its inmates. The Subadar kept his room, and passed his time in brooding over his sorrows, or in seeking consolation from the pages of the Koran. The early rains had brought all his roses into blossom, and the garden was gay with bright colours and sweet smells, but the heart of the Subadar could find no delight in them. It was in vain that Agha attempted to induce his master to occupy his favourite seat in the open air, and strove to recall him from his sorrows by placing bouquets in the window-sills and on his tables. Formerly the arrival of any of the Subadar's old military companions used to be a gala-day at Walesbyganj; but now, when Kurreem Khan, of Walesby's Horse, who had served with Shamsuddeen all through the Mutiny, called, on his way to visit his son, a promising young trooper in the Body-Guard at Calcutta, the Subadar could not see his friend, and excused himself on the plea of illness. His heart was too heavy, and perhaps he could not help contrasting in his own mind how differently Kurreem's son had turned out from his son; and he did not care to see a man who had experienced nothing of the grief that was now afflicting him. He did not sleep of nights, and Agha had marked with concern that once or twice he had quitted the house about nightfall, taking the precaution of locking the door behind him in order that no spy might follow his footsteps.

Agha's frame of mind was not much better. The Subadar's orders strictly prohibited him from access to the room in which Afzul was confined, and he was still ignorant of the cause of his young master's imprisonment. The pistol-barrel had been polished until it shone like the sword of Ali, the servant of God; but not a whit clearer did Agha's brains grow, polish he never so hard. The spiritual relief which he had anticipated from his pious pilgrimage to the shrine of Pir Murtaza Ali had not been obtained, and he felt quite savage with the saint in consequence. Agha was fully satisfied in his own mind that after the extraordinary piety which he had recently exhibited, Heaven was in some measure his debtor, and he had no notion of being kept out of his dues without grumbling.

"Had I kissed the blessed tail of the Sent's camel—the peace of God be on him and her!—I should have saved my money, and been better off," growled Agha, as he again applied himself to the pistol-barrel. "If Pir

Murtaza Ali had been a true Afghan saint, he would never have served a countryman so scurvily at a pinch."

And he rubbed away at the pistol more vigorously than ever, now and then holding it up between him and the light, and glancing his eye along the bright barrel.

"O holy tail!" continued he, casting up his eyes, "for thy merit's sake, may the Prophet lift this burden from our hearts, and a rupee for each of thy hairs will I give to thy shrine; and may the drink of the damned be my portion if after this Pir Murtaza Ali ever gets as many pies from me as would purchase a plantain.

"If we should get out of this scrape," said he, half aloud, as he again paused from polishing, "I shall certainly do something meritorious. I should not mind killing an infidel, or even two—God's curse and destruction be on them!—rather than be under any obligations to the Prophet. There are those two Hindoo *kaffirs* who are guarding the child's room—it would be as pious a deed to line their ribs with my knife as to build a mosque; and I feel that I should like to do it even if it were a sin, instead of a deed for which one would deserve a blessing."

"Agha," said a mournful voice behind him,—and starting to his feet the Khyberee saw his master standing close to him. It was night, and the flickering rays of a small oil-lamp dimly lit up the room, but the trooper could see that his master's face was deadly pale, and that he was shaking in every limb as if he had the palsy.

"Agha," said the old man, "come with me;" and the Khyberee, in astonishment, but without a word of questioning, followed his master towards the wing of the house where Afzul was confined in the old *zenana.* Pausing at the door, Shamsuddeen dismissed the Hindoo sentinel with a wave of the hand; and when he had disappeared in the darkness, turned towards the trooper, and said in a voice broken by sobs—

"Agha, the Child is ill, is dying. To-night it is decreed that he shall end his ill-spent life, and answer to his name when the Angel of Death calls over the roll. O Allah! for the Prophet's sake, may he find favour, and be able to give satisfaction in the Day of Reckoning. O martyrs of Kerbela! would that my own life could have saved our disgrace, and I would cheerfully have laid it down for his—yea, willingly as ever I put foot in the stirrup on a battle morning!"

And the old man covered his face in his gown, and sobbed as if his heart would break. Agha stood for a moment looking piteously at the man who had been the boldest rider in Walesby's Horse, who had never flinched before Afghan steel or Sikh bullet, and who now seemed so broken down that a push from a sheathed sabre could have prostrated him. Without answering a word, Agha unceremoniously entered the room, and approached the couch where Afzul was lying. The young man's face was flushed, his breathing hard and painful, and at times he groaned and muttered in his sleep. Agha, who had picked up some skill in leechcraft during his campaigning days, felt his pulse, and could see that the young man had caught one of the fevers peculiar to the district, which completely prostrate the patient while they last, and subside after two or three hours, returning every day regularly at the same time for weeks. Having satisfied himself that there was no serious cause for alarm, Agha stole quietly out of the room, where the Subadar was still standing with his face buried in the folds of his gown,—the shaking of his tall form alone betraying the intensity of his emotion.

"He must have gone crazed," said Agha to himself, "not to know that it is only jungle-fever that's the matter. However, the mistake may serve Afzul. And why should I set him right?"

"What do you wish me to do, Subadar Sahib?" he said aloud, in quiet, submissive tones, very unlike his usual rough way of speaking.

"I would have you stay by him to the end," said the Subadar, making a great effort to master his emotion; "and do all that you can to aid him in passing easily through the Bitter Hour. Give him whatever he asks for, and when all is over call me. O Afzul, my son! my son! I dare not look upon you in life again lest my purpose—— O God, would that I had died before I had to do what I have done!" and the old man reeled with agitation, and would have fallen had not Agha caught him in his arms.

"What have you done?" said Agha, in a hoarse whisper, for he was now thoroughly alarmed, and he clutched the Subadar's wrist firmly in his grasp. "Tell me what you mean! Say that you have done no harm to the Child. Speak, in the name of God, whose mercy be about us all. Say that he is safe, and that you only rave."

"Alas, no, I have killed him!" groaned the Subadar. "Unable to bear the disgrace that he must bring upon us, I have taken his life."

"*Allah Karim!* God be merciful!" cried Agha, aghast; "have you poisoned him?"

"Yes," groaned the Subadar; "Madri, the witch by the burning-ghat, gave me a certain poison, which I placed in his water. It is more than four hours since he drank it, and he cannot last much longer."

Without saying a word Agha placed the old man, who had almost fainted, on the rough bench which had been used as a seat by Afzul's warders, and rushed down-stairs in the direction of the cook-rooms. Some half-dozen grooms and servants were smoking around the lamp, placed in the centre of the floor, as he entered.

"Here, Yusuf Khan!" he cried, grasping an old *syce* or groom, who had been a camp-follower of Walesby's Horse for many a day, and had found an asylum for his old age in the Subadar's stables; "jump up! Take Bahram, and Bechoo, and Shere Singh with you, and fetch Madri, the *daina*, from her hut by the burning-ghat. Hale her hither although you should have to dig her soul out with the points of your knives. She has poisoned Afzul. Off, dogs!" he added, seeing that they hesitated; "if ye be not back with her before a Moulvie could tell over his beads, I shall send your accursed souls to your father the devil before he comes for them of himself."

Hastily snatching up their staves, Yusuf and his men vanished under the archway into the darkness. They all knew and feared the powers of Madri, but they feared Agha also, and they knew that when he promised to do mischief to any one, he seldom failed to redeem his word in all fulness.

"And this is your answer, Pir Murtaza Ali," groaned Agha; "this is the reward of my piety; this the return for my rupees! By the tombs at Kerbela, I have a mind to burn his shop to the ground! But what am I saying? Is this a moment for quarrelling with the saints? but if we should get out of this trouble—— Oh that foul witch! Unless she undo the evil of her sorceries, I shall murder her on the spot; yea, by all the names of Allah, though I should hang for the deed at Bhutpore."

Turning round, Agha proceeded across the court, and was on the point of going up-stairs, when his eye caught two figures hiding under the gloom of the archway. Jumping at the conclusion that, whoever they were, their presence had some connection with the poisoning of Afzul, he instantly drew his dagger, and rushed towards the intruders. He grasped the nearest by the shoulder, and then let go his hold in amazement as two piercing shrieks rose in the darkness, for he found he had seized a woman.

"In Shaitan's name, what mysteries are these?" cried he, angrily, as he placed himself between the two shrinking figures and the outlet from the court; "who are ye, wantons, and what seek ye here? Speak! or you shall be driven from the door as the strumpets that you are. A pretty pass you and such as you have brought us to in this house!"

"Mercy! mercy!" piped Sukheena, holding up her hands: "do not harm us, worthy master; we seek Afzul Khan."

"Go to your master the devil," growled Agha; "and belike, you will not have long to wait for him. O Afzul! Afzul! it is for such toys as these that you have cast away your young life. Hence with ye from the house! Afzul has done with such wares as you in this world."

"But hear me," cried Radha, flinging back her mantle, and putting her face so close to the trooper's as she laid her hand imploringly on his arm, that he could see her tear-filled eyes gleaming through the darkness. "A great danger threatens Afzul Khan. He may die unless I see him. I entreat you to bring him to me. Oh! for the sake of your God, for all that you hold holy, let me speak with him for only a moment. I can and will save him. Aid me in this, worthy sir, and through your good fortune I shall live again."

"By the sword of Ali! but it is the Hindoo Baboo's daughter!" cried Agha, divining from her loveliness that it was Radha who was speaking to him. "Nay, pretty mistress, I want no money from you," he added, softening his rough tones as much as possible, and pushing back the silver that Radha endeavoured to force upon him; "but ye cannot see your lover, O peri-faced one! The hand of Death is heavy upon him, and he has need to think of other things than eye-glances and hand-squeezes. Go home, lady, in quietness, for there are sights to be seen at Walesbyganj to-night that stouter hearts than yours will find hard to bear. Go in peace, and may the comfort of the Prophet, infidel though you be, lighten your load!"

"I will not go—I will see him!" cried Radha, in desperation. "Have I come here at the risk of both name and fame for nothing? I can save him, I tell you. I know all, and can save him. His blood be upon you if you turn me away. O gods, help me to soften his heart! Do you hear me, sir? I say I can save him."

"Then, by the holy tail of Bhutpore, see him you shall, mistress!" cried Agha, who felt quite unmanned by the loveliness of the pleading face which he could see dimly through the darkness, and by the nervous eagerness of the soft touch that rested on his arm. "Come with me, both of you; but I warn you that you will see a sight not good for a sore heart."

"Though he were on his death-pile on the banks of the Gungaputra, I would go to him and be *sati* for his sake," cried Radha, clasping her hands and throwing her face up to heaven in an ecstasy of enthusiasm.

"Nay, but, Radha, mistress, think what you do!" cried Sukheena, seizing the girl's arm; "holy mother Gunga, mind where you are going! These Mussulman houses are as full of devils and *rakshasas* (ghouls) as the Panch Pahar jungle of tigers. If we go in there, we shall never come out alive."

"Silence, girl," said Agha, sternly, "and follow your mistress:" and taking Radha by the hand, he led her up the stair towards the old *zenana*, while Sukheena followed closely at her back, trembling all over and casting timorous glances towards every dark corner that they passed.

In the old *zenana* all was as Agha had left it. The Subadar still sat outside the door, his face muffled up in his gown and rocking his body to and fro. He stared vacantly as Agha led the women past him into the room without a word of explanation; and then with a mournful groan relapsed into his former attitude. Afzul still slept, but his breathing was irregular and painful; a cold paleness had taken the place of the fever flush upon his face, and he grasped about mechanically with his hands as if in search of something.

"O Allah!" cried Agha, in a low voice, as he bent over the young man's bed and listened with anxious ear to Afzul's breathing; "but this is death surely; it is written on his face. God! why loiter these accursed slaves with the witch? another half-hour, and it will be too late to do anything except avenge his blood."

"There, maiden," he said, turning towards Radha, who was so nervous and agitated that she was scarcely conscious of Afzul's being before her; "you said you could save him, and you see what straits he is now in. If you can do aught for him, do it quickly; for a whole legion of *hakims* (doctors) will soon be of little avail to him."

"Alas! what is this?" cried Radha, realising the fact that Afzul was ill. "Sacred Doorga! support me. He is ill; he does not know me! Afzul, Afzul! it is I; speak to me. O heavens! what does this all mean?"

"It means death," said Agha, in a short, stern voice.

"Death!" cried Radha, casting a wild look at her informant; "then I will die too, Afzul!" she exclaimed, falling upon her knees by the bedside. "Afzul, waken up and speak to me, if only one word. See, I am come to you! I leave all—all, I say, faith and friends—for your sake. I would leave them for even your dead body, Afzul! For the love of the gods—for the love of your God, only say that you love me, and we shall die together! But he cannot answer me; the finger of Yama (the god of death) has already touched his tongue. O Shamana, leveller of all things, take my life with his, and let his bier be our bridal bed!"

And the impulsive girl put her arms round Afzul's unconscious form, and kissed his face again and again, placing her soft cheek against his breast, and showering down tears on the pillow. The Khyberee made a gesture as if at first he would roughly pull her back, and then stopped short; held out his hand to seize the girl by the arm, and then drew it back and dashed it hastily across his eyes; attempted to relieve his feelings by an oath, but broke down in a sob.

Suddenly Radha gave a piercing shriek and sprang wildly to her feet. "I am *sati* for your sake, Afzul!" she cried, throwing her arms into the air and loosening her tresses from their bonds; "I will go to you through the fire, so hear me, mother Gunga! I would go to you through hell itself. O Afzul! rouse up, and let us breathe our souls into one with our last breaths. For your sake I renounce both caste and kin; dead or alive, I am yours—yours only. To the pile with me! take me to the pile! *Hurree bol! Hurree bol! Hurree bol!*" and thus shouting the cry which the widows of her people were wont to utter on ascending the funeral pyre, Radha tossed her arms wildly upwards, and fell forward senseless upon Afzul's body.

"She is dead!" cried Agha; "dead, by the sword of the Iamum Mehdi! Here, girl! hold her up and chafe her brow while I fetch some water. 'Tis a life worth saving were she a million times an infidel. Why don't they bring the witch? May I drink the draught of the damned if I do not take some one's life for this night's work!"

When Agha rushed hastily back again with a *lota* (goblet) full of water, and began to assist Sukheena, who, through terror at the place where she was, anxiety for her mistress's safety, and apprehensions on her own account if aught should befall Radha, was hardly capable of doing anything, he found the Subadar standing by, astonishment at the presence of the females mastering for a moment his grief.

"What is this? Who are these women? How come they here at such a time?" he asked Agha, abruptly.

"'Tis the Hindoo girl whom Afzul loved," replied Agha, never pausing in the work of bringing Radha to life, rubbing her hands and fanning her brow with a tenderness that came strangely from so rough a character. "She said she came to save him, but I think it has rather been to die with him."

"Poor child!" said the Subadar; "it is hard that so beautiful a creature should have laid her love upon one so worthless. I fear she will lose her character by coming here. Deal gently with her, Agha, and get some one to take her home in quietness and safety."

"It is a lie!" cried Radha, wildly, as speech began to come back to her. "Who dares to say that Afzul Khan is a thief? who but a low-caste cur of a Dipty Baboo—a wretched oil-seller's son? He is innocent—I swear it over the holy waters of the Ganges, and by the Linga of Dhupnagar. Suspicions! what care I for your suspicions? I tell you it was to see me—yes, me, Radha Lahory—that he came about Kristo Baboo's compound at night; and think ye I would love a thief? I clear Afzul in the sight of all men. If he is guilty, so am—— Good God! what am I saying?" said she, as she regained consciousness and remembered where she was; "no earthly evidence will bring him back to life now."

The Subadar gave a deep groan. "O Agha! why was I not told of this? Why did you not let me know the cause of Afzul's night-wandering? Why did you and he allow me to believe him guilty when he was innocent? Your silence has made me slay my son;" and the old man tottered to the bedside, and taking Afzul's hand in his own, besought his forgiveness, and entreated the unconscious youth to speak to him. "O child, child! why did I not know you better?" sobbed the Subadar; "why did I not trust that, whatever your faults might be, you would never bring your father's name to dishonour? But I was too proud of my fame—jealously proud of my face being white before the Sahibs and their *Sirkar* (Government); and Allah, to punish my pride, made me mad enough to stretch out my hand against the life that I gave. *Tobah, tobah*" (repentance).*

"Now praise be to the Prophet! here they come at last!" exclaimed Agha, as a shuffling of feet was heard upon the stair; and the grooms entered the room with Madri, the witch, in their midst. The *daina* appeared to be half frightened, half indignant, at the force which had been compelled to secure her presence, and her keen grey eyes flashed a glance of angry inquiry at the various persons in the room. The shadow of a sneer crossed her lips as she marked the anguish of the Subadar, and she gave a sudden start as she recognised the beautiful daughter of Kristo Baboo in the house of a Mussulman and by a young man's bedside. "What want ye with Madri?" she inquired, turning round from one to the other with saucy impudence. "Was it that I might beg a blight to fall upon this roof-tree and all below it that ye sent your rough horse-keepers to drag me hither? May I never curse again if their arms do not ache after it for years to come!"

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* The Mussulman "*culpa mea.*"

Old Yusuf Khan released his hold of the witch in horror, and passed his hands quickly over his arms as if to satisfy himself that their strength was still intact.

"What want ye with me?" she said again; "speak quickly, for there are those waiting me that will not have their works delayed. Am I to take this young man's hand and bring him back from the inside of death's gates where he will soon stand; or restore this young damsel that honour which, methinks, she must have lost before venturing here? The power of even Madri is limited, and it would be useless to ask her to do either of these things."

The witch as she spoke looked from Afzul to Radha, both of whom were alike insensible of her presence, for the one continued to breathe heavily and sometimes moaned as if in pain, and the other fondled the sleeping man's hands with her lips, and seemed careless of the presence of the others.

"Undo the work of your own foul drugs, witch," said Agha in a low whisper, clutching Madri by the arms and dragging her to the bedside; "and know that if Afzul Khan should die by your means, I will take your life though there were not another sorceress outside of hell!"

"Ay, indeed!" said Madri, with a scornful toss of the head and a meaning look towards the Subadar; "hold out your foot to a cobra, and then beat the brute for biting you; but, good master soldier, let you know that one more concerned than you hath done to the young man what has been done, and that Madri has his assurance for her safety."

"Peace, good woman," said the Subadar, mildly, "and quickly do your best to counteract the drug. If you save the Child's life I shall double what you have got, and give you quadruple what you have been promised."

"Nay," said the witch, looking doubtfully towards Afzul; "Madri weaves no weak spells that can be broken again and mended like a fowler's net. What she has done is done, and the gods themselves cannot save him upon whom she has laid her finger."

"To work, witch, at once!" hissed Agha in her ear. "Thy life for his; for though you knew the spell that is upon the seal of Solomon, I will cast thy dead body to the jackals of the jungle within half an hour of his death."

Sullenly Madri approached the bed and laid her hand upon Afzul's forehead and placed the other over his heart. "When did he take the potion?" said she, turning to the Subadar.

"The first hour after sundown," said the old man. "May God forgive me! would rather I had taken it myself."

"Strange," muttered Madri; "it has never taken so long to work before. An hour and a half served to settle Munnoo Sen's mother-in-law. I can't have given him a wrong bottle. Show me the vial," she said, turning round to the old man.

Shamsuddeen took a small glass bottle from the bosom of his gown and handed it to the sorceress. The *daina* took it and pretended to mutter some exorcisms over it, but managed meanwhile to hold the bottle to her nostrils. She started as she smelt it, and hastily turning away, began to mutter and gesticulate wildly over the bed where Afzul lay.

"The love-philtre," she said to herself; "this piece of rare luck has saved my life from that savage Mussulman. Sri Kali-ji, this is fortunate! and if ever I gave gold to the gods in my life it would be for this delivery. How could the bottles have got mixed? I must be more careful in future, for it is not in every case that a mistake like this would serve me so happily. And Krishna, the priest's bookish son, has got the death-draught. Well, well, how could I help it? The gods, and not I, have taken the one and left the other. It is their doing, and I am thankful I have not a Brahmin's blood on my hands. And now I must work a cure for the satisfaction of these bumpkins. Not a very difficult thing to do; for, when the oppressive effects of the drug wear away to-morrow, there will be nothing the matter with him but a little qualmishness. I daresay he has been worse many a morning after a drinking-bout overnight."

"Witness, ye vile out-castes, and you also, degraded daughter of the Brahmins, the power that the gods have given to Madri! The young man is already bound fast in the chains of Yama, the god of death. The holy king stands behind the bed ready to claim his victim. I see his red garments, his inflamed eyes, his heavy club, and the deadly *dhatura* flower stuck in his hair. The three worlds tremble before his terrific shape, but he cannot strike terror into the heart of Madri. And now stand aside, for I summon to my aid those who must not be impeded." The trembling group huddled as far away from the sorceress as the four walls would allow them. Yusuf Khan and the grooms stood trembling in every limb, and anxiously handling every amulet that they had about them. Instinctively Radha had drawn near to the Subadar for protection, and the old man put his hand upon her shoulder, in token that he would defend her. Agha essayed a prayer which ended in curses, and stood gloomily in the corner looking at the witch and handling his dagger.

All was still, save the low tones of the Subadar, who continued to mutter the "Opener" prayer from the Koran, and the voice of the *daina* speaking to herself in low whispers. After a few minutes' unintelligible pantomime, the witch broke into a sneering laugh, and laid her hand upon Afzul's head.

"He is mine!" she exclaimed. "Even the lord of death fears to fight with Madri, and flees from her presence. There! see how fast he mounts his buffalo, and scurries off to Yamalaya before a blow was struck! There, sir, take your son, and when he wakens to-morrow morning make him bathe in the Gungaputra, and throw three palmfuls of water across his left shoulder, and he will be as well as ever he was."

"Nay, but, Subadar Sahib," said Agha, coming forward, "she must not be allowed to go thus. We have nothing but her word for the Child's recovery. It took the witch of Jumrood half a long night to cure Rustom Khan, the Duffadar of Walesby's Horse, when he had been bedevilled by her spells the time we were quartered at Peshawur. Why, she hasn't said as many charms as would cure a horse of a stomach-ache."

"Peace, man," said the witch; "ye know little of the power of Madri. She could have brought back yonder youth from the door of death, by merely raising her little finger, as easily as she could by one word strike you palsied in her presence this instant."

"I take refuge with Allah," said Agha, spitting in contempt of the *daina's* threat, but nevertheless drawing back from her a pace or two. "Is it your will, then, Subadar Sahib, that the sorceress depart?"

"Let her go in peace," said the Subadar, "and come to-morrow night, when I shall give her money. At present I can think of nothing but this unhappy child. Let the men take care of her to her home."

"Madri wants not their escorts," said the witch, scornfully; "her guard awaits her at the door, and she will go down the road with more demons in train than the biggest rajah in Bengal has troopers. I leave with you, sir, such peace as may be to ye from the recovery of a prodigal; and to you, girl, the consolation which your paramour will give you for breaking your caste and abandoning your friends—a crime on which the curse of Brahma ever rests:" and so saying, Madri strode haughtily from the apartment.

"And these damsels," said Agha, "what is to be done with them? They are little likely to get a kindly welcome from Kristo Baboo after their night's work. Say, Sahib, would she not make a fair bride for Afzul, if she put aside her filthy faith and became a true daughter of Islam. It is a pity that so beautiful a woman should be thrown away on infidels."

"Poor child!" said the Subadar, stroking her soft hair tenderly, while the proud Brahmin girl, who now began to be sensible of the consequences to which her rash generosity had exposed her, sobbed as if her heart would break, and Sukheena cried to keep her company,—"poor child! she cannot leave this roof to-night at any rate. Take them to the next room, Agha, and lock them up, that no harm may happen to them; and to-morrow send the Ryot of Milkiganj's wife hither to prepare their food for them. It may be that Allah has ordained their salvation. As for me, I shall watch by the Child's bedside—watch and pray that he may waken from his sleep a better man."

CHAPTER XLII.

YAMA VISITS THE TEMPLE.

THE sun was sinking behind the Panch Pahar hills, and the long, dark shadows were creeping up from the Gungaputra towards the village of Dhupnagar, as Ramanath, the priest, sat in the temple porch. It was the season of the early rains, when the sun sets in Bengal in a fuller flush of glory than at any other time of the year. Surya, the sun-god, no longer plodded with weary feet along his beaten track, through a hard, pale, desert sky without a single oasis of cloud where he might rest himself, and went straight to his couch with fading brightness and fatigued mien. He now wandered about among the rain-gathering clouds, kissing them until their cheeks blushed rosy-red at his touch; and their shadowy forms caught the bright hues from his many-coloured mantle. Every now and then he would throw through the rifts in heaven a flood of glory upon the earth below; and when Mangula (Mars) came forth red in his scarlet fighting gear and bloody necklace, the sun reluctantly gave place to the warder of the first watch of night, and retired, casting many a lingering look from over the rugged hill-top, and through between the tall clumps of *sal* trees on the crest of the western range. It was a lovely evening, and nowhere lovelier than in the Gungaputra valley which Nature had formed so fitly, with its green slopes and leafy woods, and noble river running stately through its centre, for responding to any beautifying influences from above. The villagers came forth from their houses and seated themselves about the village green, feeling a sensuous pleasure in the beauty of the evening. The women took their *kalasis* (water-pitchers), and in twos and threes went down the road to the Gungaputra for water to cook the evening meal. Three Shells, the usurer, with Prosunno the lawyer, and Protap the accountant in obsequious attendance, came forth into the bazaar, and leaning on his gold-headed cane, received the salaams of the by-passers with as much affectation of dignity as he could inflate into his long, lean figure. Three Shells was in a peculiarly gracious .mood that evening, and laughed and joked with his companions as if it were a feast-day—gave four annas to cripple Bhim, the religious beggar, who stared in astonishment at a gratuity from so unwonted a quarter, and told both Prosunno and Protap, under the hearing of Gangooly, the headman, that he intended on the morrow to call at the temple and have a long talk with his worthy friend, Ramanath the priest; and blandly returning the low salaams of the villagers, the mahajan and his friends made their way down the road in the direction of the Gungaputra. In a corner of the village green, in earnest conversation, stood Gangooly, the headman, and Mr R. C. Roy. The villagers had marked with much curiosity that a confidential intercourse had sprung up between their archon and the anglicised Bengalee. They met every evening and talked for hours together; but what was the subject of their conversation no one could form the least guess. When Dwarkanath, the schoolmaster, added himself, uncalled, to their councils, both were silent, and then started a conversation on the state of the rice-crops, which, as Dwarkanath sagely observed, had no more to do with what was in their minds than the prayer upon a *jogee's* (religious mendicant) lips had to do with his thought of how he would get his belly filled. But when young Biprodass, the schoolmaster's son, sought to intrude upon their secret discussions, the irate Gangooly had anathematised him as a crow, and a broker, and the bearer of a sticky tongue, to which the words of others adhered; and had hinted that Biprodass would be much more of an ornament to the village society if a closer intercourse were cultivated between his shoulders and a stout bamboo sapling—an introduction which Gangooly declared it would give him much pleasure to be the means of effecting. So the villagers could only conjecture what secret of importance was between them, and look on from a distance at their interviews. The headman's steadfastness in orthodox Hindooism was above suspicion, or the villagers might well have been uneasy at the new friendship which had sprung up between him and a pervert from the faith.

The dark had settled down thickly upon the village green, and the fire-flies had lit up the trees, and converted the hedge of feathery bamboos that bounded the temple compound into a fretted screen of starwork, when the two broke up their conference; and the elders had retired from the village, and only Biprodass and a few wild youths who were planning to frighten Malati's mother, the wife of Protap, the accountant, who had gone to call upon the Ryot of Milkiganj's wife, and would have to cross the haunted jungle coming home.

"And so keep your own counsel, friend headman," said Mr Roy, striking a light for his cigar, "and I rather think we shall be in a position to astonish the magistrate when he comes to Dhupnagar. The Dipty is on the wrong scent evidently, and will be as savage as a tiger without a tail when he finds that you have detected the robbers."

"Sri-Krishna, may it end well!" said Gangooly, rubbing his hands with joy; "but doesn't your honour think that it would be as well to send to Gapshapganj for a few police sepoys? We are quiet people, we Dhupnagar folk, and not used to resist *lathials* (club-men)."

"Yes," said Mr Roy, scornfully, "and put the Dipty on the trail, so that he may get all the credit and us all the trouble. No, Gangooly, my good friend, bring a big stick with you, and arm your ancients, Hurree and Lutchmun, with clubs. Besides, I have this revolver, which will be useful if they are refractory. Did you ever see a pistol, Gangooly, that would fire six shots without being loaded?"

"The gods be about us!" cried the headman, turning away his face; "hold it away, sir. There is only one gun in Dhupnagar; it belongs to Kali the fowler, and that can seldom be got to go off once instead of six times."

"So much the better, master headman," said Mr Roy; "these rascals have less chance of being armed: and now off with you, and forget not to be ready before the second watch is begun."

"One would do much to throw dirt in the face of the Dipty, and to raise one's *izzut* (reputation) before the Magistrate Sahib," said Gangooly to himself, as he walked slowly homewards; "but though my fathers have been headmen of Dhupnagar since the British obtained the stewardship of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa, they were never called upon to risk their lives in this fashion. Sri-Siva-ji, keep my head in safety!"

Ramanath sat in the temple porch until the sun went down, and the building was shrouded in the darkness of night. His pipe was out, and he did not seek to light it again. He rested his head on his hand, and the sadness of his heart found frequent expression in deep sighs. He had heeded not the beauty of the sunset as it faded before his eyes; his birds had flitted and chirped about his head, and after they had given up all hopes of rousing him to give them some seeds for supper, had sought their nests in the boughs of the sacred *peepul* tree and in the eaves of the temple. Modhoo, the porter, had come in and lit the lamp before the shrine, and brought the cups, and the flowers, and the sweetmeats for evening worship, but the priest had been unconscious of his presence. And it was not until the night dews began to fall, and the stars had risen high above the highest of the Panch Pahar peaks, that Ramanath rose with a shiver from his seat.

"God is now on my left," said Ramanath, sadly, "and nothing goes well with me. I must have done some evil in a former birth for which the gods are now contending with me. That ill-starred boy will take his own way, do what I can to prevent him. Who could have thought that after this marriage had been made up, he would thus fall back? But he must even drink such water as he has drawn, and I warrant me he finds the dregs a bitter draught. I feel a strange faintness upon me and a sickening at the heart this evening. I must have set my love too much upon this boy to be so cast down about his going against me.

"He will not be long in coming to his senses when he has only got philosophy to feed upon," he continued, coming forward to the edge of the platform, and looking down the dark valley. "An empty stomach is a good counsellor when it cries prudence. Besides, he has too much of the spirit of the Gossains of Dhupnagar to associate with low-caste men upon equal terms. It is all very well for him to talk about equality and human brotherhood, and all that sort of cant, so long as it is condescension on his part to admit these theories; but turn it the other way—let some seek to *sahib* it over him—and Krishna will soon show the *poita* (Brahminical cord distinctive of the caste).

"At all events, he will find a home here when he is tired of roaming, and rice, and a roof to cover him; and when I am gone he will have plenty to keep him in comfort and honour all the days of his life. I must take back that paper from Gangooly and alter its provisions. I see no obligations that I am under to leave all my property to the Linga. Provision shall be made for the maintenance of the worship, but Krishna must be my heir.

"I cannot think what has come over me to-night. I feel faint and giddy, and can scarcely keep down the sickness," said he, placing his brow against the stone lintel of the temple. "Ever since I took that draught of water in Krishna's room I feel as if the angel of death had gone inside me. I suppose it is my foolish love for the lad. Poor boy! how he loved me when I used to carry him to the temple on my shoulder a little child, and he would clasp his small hands together and bend down before the Linga! And he loves me still, though these unlucky opinions of his have come as a cloud between us. It is as though my inside were on fire. I must get through the service and go home."

With unsteady steps, and with eyes that seemed to swim in his head, Ramanath entered the temple, and began to prepare for the evening worship of the Linga. But, simple as the ritual was, it appeared to him that evening a labour which he could hardly hope to get over. He took the lamp from a niche in the wall, where Modhoo, the porter, had left it, and placed it with a heavy languid air before the altar. Its flickering rays shone darkly upon the black stone idol, smeared with streaks of paint, and garlanded with faded *vilwa* leaves, and played upon the dusky corners of the wall, which, like a sullen face that refuses to smile at a jest, grew all the more black and grim for it. In a bole to the left of the Linga stood Three Shells' present, the golden goblet, the graven figures on which seemed to Ramanath to grin and leer at him as if a spirit of devilry had suddenly quickened the bas-reliefs into life. An angry scowl came from each of the three heads of Siva, the destroyer, and even the lovely Parvati stared at him with cruel stony eyes; while the meddling mother-in-law seemed as if she were covertly putting ill against him into the hearts of her children. Ramanath had seen the vase by lamp-light every night for some time past, but it had never presented the same weird and demoniacal appearance to his eyes before. He felt himself growing worse and worse every minute; his inside was as it were on fire, and he could hardly repress his inclination to vomit even in the holy place. He staggered as he took the platters of rice and plantains and placed them before the shrine, and then fell rather than prostrated himself in front of the Linga.

"What can this be?" he groaned, as he buried his burning forehead in the palms of his hands. "I am as if my feet were already in the holy streams of the Gungaputra, and death had stopped up all the doors and were waiting to seize me. O Mritunjaya, conqueror of death, keep thy arm over thy slave!"

He raised himself with difficulty, and reaching his hand to a goblet of Gungaputra water which stood among the sacrificial vessels, greedily drained the contents. "My curse upon Three Shells and his vase," he murmured, looking up towards the *lota*. "Why did I ever allow it to come hither? The god frowns on me as if I had betrayed his service. I have never felt happy since I placed it in the temple. It has mingled a scent of blood with the smell of the sacrifices."

Again he turned towards the Linga and endeavoured to compose himself to prayer, but the pains which had been allayed for an instant by the draught of water, had again seized him with redoubled force; and he lay and writhed in agony before the shrine.

Had Ramanath's senses been as acute as they usually were, he would have heard a slight noise at the temple door, the faint sound of a cautiously dropped footfall, and the rustle of the *peepul* leaves which the presence of an intruder had stirred into motion in the stillness of the night. Two dark figures came warily stealing through the compound, and mounted the temple steps on tiptoe. "All right—he is there," whispered the former of the two peeping inside the temple door; "move gently, Tettoo."

"Gently, Panchoo," said the other in the same low tones, as, holding the temple lintel, he noiselessly balanced himself upon the door-step.

"O God!" groaned Ramanath within, "this is death undoubtedly; and to die here alone! Which of my many sins has so incensed the gods that they have punished me thus? Oh for a drink of water to quench only for a moment this hell-fire that is burning in my breast. If I could raise my voice they might hear me. Help! help! son Krishna! Modhoo, porter! Chakwi! my Chakwi, help!"

The two men interchanged a scared glance in the darkness. "What is the matter with him, Panchoo?" whispered Tettoo of his more sapient comrade.

"I don't know," said Panchoo, with a shudder; "but I wish the Gungaputra were well between us and this place."

"So do I, Panchoo," responded the other; "there are too many gods and ghosts about here for me. I would rather cut half-a-score of throats in broad daylight than do this job."

"They hear me not," groaned Ramanath, "and I must die alone. Poor Krishna! he will bitterly mourn his father for all our differences. And Chakwi too, who loved me as well as though she had been my own flesh and blood. God keep them all, and carry my blessing to them, for they will have little enough else when I am gone. The temple and our family lands will go to strangers. Would that the gods might give me strength enough to crawl to Gangooly, the headman's, and burn that paper I gave him! Fool that I was, to disinherit my son! and all for an idol that sees me devoured by sharp flames at its very foot—me that have ministered to it for forty years—without rendering me aught of assistance. O Siva! after having served thee so all these years, is it thus I am requited? The gods are dying, else would they not leave me thus."

"I don't like this, Panchoo," said Tettoo, who with difficulty could keep his teeth from chattering with terror; "for the gods' sake let us go hence. See him now, how he welters and writhes and foams at the mouth! The hand of some god is upon him."

"Peace," whispered the more stolid Panchoo, "he is dying. You won't have to spoil your new knife after all. See where Three Shells' vase stands—a brave dish, Tettoo. Rakhal Dass, the Benares jeweller, will give us a thousand rupees for it."

"Ah, yes, a thousand rupees," said Tettoo, rubbing his hands as he peered round the temple door at the gift of the mahajan glittering in the lamp-light; "why, we'll be rajahs, Tettoo, when we get back to our villages;" and, heedless of the terrible death-struggle that was going on before him, the callous wretch rubbed his hands and chuckled at the fine prospect which he pictured to himself.

"What! not marry Kristo Baboo's daughter?" cried Ramanath, raising his head upon his arm, and looking wildly forward into the darkness; "ay, but you shall though, even if we should need bullocks and ropes to drag you to the family altar. I swear it by the Linga of Dhupnagar; and an oath taken by that is not to be lightly broken, like an oath by the trumpery Linga of Gapshapganj or the rickety old temple of the Dhurma Thakoor. What say ye, Chakwi? Ay, ay, he is your husband; much joy have ye had of him, poor little goose! But he shall make amends to you, girl—he shall; I swear it by all the gods! The gods! ay, much to swear by when they let me perish thus uncomforted. Help! Chakwi! Krishna! god of the azure neck, Maheshwara, thou who dwellest upon the hills! hither to my help or I perish—I perish!"

"I think he is dead, Tettoo," said Panchoo, as the priest fell forward apparently lifeless, his head lying face downwards at the foot of the Linga; "he must be gone now. Just go forward and seize the vase. I see nothing else in the temple worth grabbing, and time goes apace. We must be through the passes of Panch Pahar before the false dawn."

"Why don't you go yourself, brother?" said Tettoo, doubtfully, as he played with his knife, and looked with frightened indecision now at Panchoo, then at the vase, and again at the priest's prostrate body; "you stand nearest the door—why don't you go yourself?" he added, drawing back a few paces.

"Fool," said Panchoo, turning round angrily; "and who do you think is to keep watch at the door if I go in? Who is to keep us from being taken? You know that you have no head, Tettoo."

"Yes, that's true, Panchoo; but I don't like to go in all the same," returned Tettoo, humbly.

"I daresay not. The dead man might bite you. Bah, Tettoo! you call yourself a robber! You were never good for anything better than for stealing old wives' wallets as they went on pilgrimage. We might have been across the river if you had only been active enough."

"I suppose I must do it," said Tettoo, with a sigh and a shrug of the shoulders. "It might have been worse if we had had to kill him; but still there is something unearthly in his dying in that way, just as we came to slay him—is there not, Panchoo?"

"Tush," whispered Panchoo, "go inside, man, and don't stand babbling here."

Reluctantly Tettoo pulled out his knife from his waist-cloth and entered the temple. Twice he drew back as he placed his foot inside the threshold, when the lamp-wick sputtered and threw a shadow across his way; and again he moved onward, assured by an encouraging glance from Panchoo. Warily he stepped on tiptoe across the temple, keeping one eye fixed upon the vase and the other upon the body of the priest.

Noiselessly he had taken the *lota* in his hand, and was turning towards the door, when with a wild cry, Ramanath struggled to his knees and fixed his staring eyes, which seemed almost bursting from their sockets, upon the thief. Tettoo dropped both the vase and his knife, and stood with shaking knees, and almost ready to faint with terror, while he stared at the priest.

"Have the gods sent you," cried Ramanath, "to remove the cause of my sin and the plague which has come upon me for it? Say so quickly, I conjure you, for the hand of Yama is heavy on my head, and I burn within. Nay, I know you now—a vile thief. Take it, stained with a Brahmin's blood, and may a Brahmin's curse follow it wherever it goes! Yet stay, if you would earn my blessing—reward—much gold—my son Krishna—call him! O *Siva Sarva!* he who is everything, keep, keep——!" and Ramanath the priest fell forward a corpse at the foot of the idol which he had served so long.

Tettoo gave one horrified glance at the body, and catching up the *lota* darted swiftly out into the darkness. "Hist, Panchoo! Panchoo!" he cried, in a low voice; but his accomplice had been no less terrified than he was, and had fled at the sight of the priest. "It was very unkind of Panchoo," said Tettoo to himself, as he paused to take breath when he gained the village green; "I don't think I could have run away and left him in the lurch in that fashion, however frightened I had been. But I never had any head ; I stuck to the *lota*, however."

Covering the vase with an end of his waist-cloth, Tettoo took the road and walked quickly down towards the fords of the Gungaputra, occasionally pausing to look behind him lest any one was following after him. "It is very unkind of Panchoo," he again repeated to himself. "I am sure I would not have done so to him; but the *lota* will be all my own, at any rate."

At the corner of Walesbyganj, where the road dips for a few hundred yards into the jungle, Tettoo heard a low peculiar whistle, which he answered in the same key, and in a few minutes more the truant Panchoo had joined his comrade. "Have you got the *lota ?*" he asked eagerly, putting out his hand to feel his comrade's bundle. "You surely were not such a *gadha* (donkey) as to run away without it ? "

"No thanks to you, Panchoo," said Tettoo, drily. "The Brahmin might have cursed me into a stone for all that you would have done to assist me."

"Tush, man! Was it not that I might help you if you were taken that I got out of the way ? I merely ran to see that there was no one coming down the road. But you never had any head, Tettoo."

"That's true, Panchoo; but I always stood fast by you when there was anything to do."

"And so I have by you," retorted Panchoo ; "but give me the *lota*, and I shall carry it in the rice-bag."

"No, Panchoo," said Tettoo, with dogged firmness. "I'll carry the *lota* myself."

"You fool," said Panchoo, fiercely, "give it to me. You cannot be trusted to take care of it. What story would you tell if any one were to search you and ask you how you had come by the vase? You have no head, Tettoo."

"That's true, Panchoo," retorted Tettoo, setting his teeth; "but I'll keep the vase."

"We shall see about that," cried Panchoo, throwing himself upon the other thief, and a furious struggle ensued between the two thieves. Panchoo was the more agile, but the weight and dead strength were on Tettoo's side. They grasped one another, but Tettoo caught the lower hold. Twice he endeavoured to throw his antagonist, and twice Panchoo, by clutching his throat, compelled Tettoo to let him down on the ground. The third time, Tettoo, putting forward the whole force of his bull-like strength, raised Panchoo from the earth, hugging him so closely that he could scarcely breathe, and in another second Panchoo would have been on his back and Tettoo above him. Disengaging one hand from his antagonist's throat, Panchoo snatched his knife from his belt, and throwing up his arm, buried it in Tettoo's shoulder. The other relaxed his grasp, and with a low groan fell heavily upon the road. In another instant Panchoo had disengaged the vase from Tettoo's waist-cloth, and fled towards the fords of the Gungaputra, leaving his comrade bleeding on the highway.

"It is very unkind of Panchoo," groaned Tettoo, as he endeavoured to drag himself to the soft side of the road. "I would not have done as much to him; but then I never had any head."

CHAPTER XLIII.

SIGNS AND WONDERS.

HARDLY had the sun risen above the old mango-trees of the Pagoda Tope next morning, when an alarm went through the village of Dhupnagar that something was amiss. Greedy Ram Lall, the oil-seller, who had been earliest astir in the bazaar, had seen two of Kristo Baboo's servants rush past him before the grey dusk had quite faded from the streets, and while the fresh sunbeams still danced about the house-tops ; but they stayed not for his questioning, and darted rapidly past. They had parted company at the road fork, the old man marked—one striking off up the valley for Bhutpore, while the other took the path that led up the hill past the Pagoda Tope to Gapshapganj. This was sufficient of an event in Dhupnagar to justify Ram Lall in passing the news of it to right and left when his neighbours came forth to open their shops, and the traders soon began to speculate what was wrong in the house of Lahory. By-and-by a bustle took place at the lower end of the bazaar, and such folk as were already out of doors there, were seen hastily running down the road towards Walesbyganj and the Gungaputra. "What was wrong?" was the general question. At first the answer was that a body had been found on the road below Walesbyganj, and hard by the corner of the jungle. "Two bodies," insisted young Biprodass, who, however, had only got his information at second hand, and was hurrying past to the scene of the tragedy. "Two Brahmins and a cow have been foully murdered, and all by these Mussulman dogs!" cried Rutton Pal, the spirit-seller, as he furiously rushed down the bazaar with a dangerous-looking hatchet in his hand. "As you value your lives, don't touch the bodies until I get down," cried Prosunno, the lawyer, who had caught at the prospect of a job, and who now came out with half his clothes in his hand. "What is all this ado?" asked Three Shells, the money-lender, as he stepped forth into the bazaar in smartly-starched clothes and gorgeous golden turban, bringing with him a perfume of roses and musk that for a moment dulled the fetid smell of Ram Lall's oil-pots. "What's the matter, Prosunno?"

"A murder below Walesbyganj, sir," said Prosunno; "but it does not yet appear who has been slain."

"A murder! the gods forbid!" cried Three Shells, looking piously upwards. "Surely the Black Age is beginning when such a deed could be done in a peaceful village like this. What son of perdition could have done the deed? I was on my way to make an offering at the temple, but I will go with you, Prosunno, and see this sad sight."

But scarcely had they passed the village green when they met a crowd of people coming up the road from Walesbyganj, and learned from them that the facts of the case had been exaggerated. There was a pool of blood on the road, to be sure, but no trace of any body, either of man or beast. Dwarkanath, the schoolmaster, started the suggestion that some wayfarer might have been devoured by a tiger there, and the remains carried off into the jungle. But Shama Churn, the grain-seller, pointed to the footmarks in the soft mud by the wayside, which seemed to indicate that a struggle had taken place. Nitye, the quack doctor, was prepared to stake his professional reputation that the pool of blood had come from the veins of a man and not from those of a stray bullock, as some sceptics had been ready enough to suggest in derision of the anxiety of the majority. Three Shells was piously praying that no evil might be presaged by the omen, and Prosunno, the lawyer, was talking learnedly about the absence of a *corpus delicti*, when a whisper passed through the group of villagers that Kristo Baboo's daughter had been carried away overnight.

It was young Biprodass, the son of Dwarkanath, the schoolmaster, who, with his usual curiosity, had gone prying about Kristo's compound, and had heard the tidings from a bearer that made this startling announcement. At first his tale received no credence, and Shama Churn, the grain-dealer, reviled the youth as a broker of bad news, and a seer of owls upon other people's roof-trees. But when Biprodass declared his source of information, and old Ram Lall, the oilman, corroborated his report, by telling how he had seen Kristo's messengers rushing off to Bhutpore and Gapshapganj, awe fell upon the villagers, and each looked upon his neighbour with a gaze of inquiring horror. Had the abduction of Radha Lahory any connection with the pool of blood on the road below Walesbyganj? This was the thought that flashed through every one's mind, but no one liked to give utterance to it. The mysterious disappearance of a marriageable damsel is a delicate subject to discuss, and Kristo Baboo was not a man whose family affairs were a safe subject for bazaar gossip, and accordingly the fears of the villagers grew all the more serious that they could not well relieve their minds by giving expression to them.

By-and-by up the road from Walesbyganj came Rutton Pal, the liquor-seller, and all the tag-rag and bob-tail of the village, shouting and gesticulating. "The Mussulmans! the Mussulmans!" was the cry; "the unclean ones who defile our daughters and murder our sons!" As a spark of fire catches dry grass, so the idea that the Muhammadans were the abductors and murderers of Radha ran through the crowd of villagers. Had they not ever been oppressors and *badmashes* (bad fellows)? Was there a man in the village who had not been menaced, or a woman that had not been insulted, at one time or another, by them? The peace of their homes, their religion, their caste itself, was in danger. And so the mob began to bawl, "Down with the kine-killers! down with the ravishers!" with right good will; Rutton Pal and young Bulram, the ryot of Milkiganj's stout son, who had not forgotten how Afzul had dishonoured his family by carrying off his sister Bel Puttee, leading the chorus.

"Peace, my friends," said Shama Churn, the grain-seller, who, in the absence of Gangooly, the headman, felt that it was his duty as a father of the village to endeavour to restore order. "What proof have ye that it was the Mussulmans who have done this deed? Take heed what you do, for the old man's face is white before the Sircar, and he dips in the dish with the Magistrate Sahib. What proofs, I ask you, can you bring forward?"

But before they could reply, Agha came clattering up the Walesbyganj road on black Sultan, scattering the villagers to right and left with contemptuous indifference to the safety of all that were in his way. As he rode up to the edge of the village green there was a general move to the side of the road, while only those in the rear of the crowd ventured to keep up the cry, "Down with the Muhammadans! down with the kine-killers!"

"Peace with your yelping, dogs of the devil!" cried Agha, as he slackened his speed to switch the nearest of the crowd out of his way. "Home to the strumpets, your wives! There is dirt upon your altars—the curse of the Prophet upon them and on you!"

"Down with the kine-killers!" cried both Rutton Pal and the young ryot of Milkiganj, as they rushed upon the trooper. The ryot aimed a blow at Agha with a heavy bamboo pole, which so practised a rider had little difficulty in making his horse evade.

"*Deen, deen!* (for the Faith!)" shouted Agha, as he forced Sultan backwards until the charger nearly rested on his haunches. In another instant Agha buried his spurs in his horse's sides, and made him bound forward against the young ryot, who, knocked down by the animal's chest, was trampled under foot and left with several broken ribs and innumerable bruises as memorials of the fray. As he fell, the Khyberee snatched the bamboo from his hands, and broke it over the sconce of Rutton Pal, who was rushing forward, hatchet in hand. Rutton fell with a groan beside the ryot, and the crowd drew back from the Muhammadan as rapidly as the press behind would allow.

Agha coolly dismounted and examined Sultan's knees and coat to satisfy himself that his favourite had sustained no injury in the *mêlée,* and stroked the charger's mane, who, mindful of his old campaigning days, held his head high, and pawed the ground, while his eyes flashed impatiently hither and thither, expecting to see the well-known gleam of steel bayonets or the thick white smoke belching up from the batteries.

"Steady, Sultan! steady, my brother!" said Agha, as he put his foot in the stirrup and swung himself into the saddle. "I think shame to use any horse that is not fit for the knackers against such scum. And now, ye infidel dogs! are there any more of you desirous of broken heads? Say so, then, sharply; for, willing as I would be to gratify you, I cannot stay your pleasure all day here."

A low murmur of anger from the crowd was the only answer to Agha's invitation, and the noise grew louder and louder as the Khyberee rode away through the bazaar, and turned off at a hand-gallop along the Bhutpore road. But it was not until the rider had disappeared behind the jungle that they again ventured to raise the cry, "Down with the kine-killers! down with the Mussulmans;" and came forward to raise the prostrate bodies of Rutton Pal and the young ryot of Milkiganj.

"These are proofs for you; what more proofs can be needed?" was now the cry, while the hubbub became greater than before, and shouts were raised for Gangooly, the headman: "Where *was* the headman? If there had been a chance of annoying his neighbours by enforcing any of his fines or regulations, he would not have been so backward. Where was he now, then?"

But even as they grumbled, Gangooly the headman made his appearance behind the crowd from the temple gate, and came out upon the green. Modhoo, the porter, was with him, his clothes rent, and his face expressing as much grief as his sulky and churlish features could well exhibit; and behind came Mr R. C. Roy, looking more active and consequential than ever.

"How now, my friends?" said Gangooly; "what means this riot? Is this seemly, think you, while the father of the village, the worthy priest, Ramanath Gossain, is lying dead within a few yards of you, and his family are raising the dead wail over his body? Disperse, I say, and to your work this instant, or I shall *chalan* (report) some half-score of you to the magistrate—may his favour increase!—who is coming to Dhupnagar this very evening."

"What did you say, Mr Headman?" said Three Shells, putting on an appearance of concern, although the twinkle of his little eyes were like to betray his delight; "surely nothing can have happened to the good Ramanath Gossain."

"Alas! yes," said Gangooly, shaking his head and speaking with unaffected emotion. "Yama, the god of death, has set his hand heavy upon him. He never came home from the temple last night, and Modhoo the porter, here, found him lying cold and stiff before the Linga this morning. Sri-Jaganathji! it is for our sins that so great a calamity has come upon the village."

"Calamity indeed!" said Three Shells, with a hypocritical sigh; "but what did the worthy priest die of, Mr Headman? When one departs so suddenly, it is only right that the cause of death should be ascertained."

"What investigation will bring Ramanath back to life?" said Gangooly, mournfully; "the hour that was written on his forehead had come, else he had not died."

"Surely there could be no suspicion of any foul play in a place like this," broke in Mr Roy; "it is unreasonable to suppose that a good man like Ramanath Gossain had made any enemies, or that there were those among us who had an interest in putting him out of the way. Is it not so, Mr Money-lender?" he added, darting a keen glance into Three Shells' face.

The usurer returned his gaze with an uneasy look. "Surely," he said; "what enemies could the worthy Ramanath have among us? As for me, I feel as if I had lost my father and best friend;" and he turned away from Mr Roy, and began to talk in a low voice with Prosunno the lawyer and Protap the accountant.

The news of Ramanath's death had served for a moment to distract the attention of the crowd; but as Gangooly once more turned towards them, and in tones of authority ordered them to disperse quietly to their homes, the uproar once more arose, "Down with the ravishers! down with the kine-killing Mussulmans." "*Dohai, dohai! Kumpani ka dohai!*" (Justice, justice! the Company's justice!) cried Rutton Pal, coming forward with broken sconce and bloody face. "Justice, Mr Headman, on these murderous Mussulmans! They have ravished and murdered a Brahmin damsel, and slaughtered me, as you see."

"And a good riddance it would have been for the village had they killed you outright, you purveyor of abominations," said Gangooly, turning sternly to the spirit-seller. "It is you with your *bhang* and *arrack* that put mischief into men. Home to your shop! and take care that I do not bring the police from Bhutpore to overhaul it for you before long. A pretty fellow you to complain of the Muhammadans!"

"But, Mr Headman," interposed Shama Churn, "here has been Kristo Baboo's daughter carried away, no one knows whither, and there is a pool of blood on the road below Walesbyganj: it is right that the matter should be inquired into."

"Ay, ay," cried the crowd; "let us have justice. If the headman fears the Mussulmans, we will punish them ourselves."

"Peace, my friends," said Gangooly; "has Kristo Baboo made any complaints to you about his daughter? Well, then, it would be only like sensible men if you waited till he did so, before you cry 'clubs.' As for the blood, I know all about that, and can tell you that it has no more to do with Kristo Baboo's daughter than with Sita, the wife of Rama. I will explain all to the Magistrate Sahib, and do you give yourselves no concern about it."

But the people of Dhupnagar had not been used to have their archon keep secrets to himself, and murmurs again arose. Rutton Pal, with his broken head, had slunk away to the outskirts of the crowd ; but the elders of the village, Shama Churn and Dwarkanath, who were not sorry to have an opportunity of retaliating upon Gangooly for the airs which he sometimes assumed by virtue of his office, did not hesitate to say that the headman was afraid of the Muhammadans, and that if he were half as ready to stir for preserving the lives of the villagers as for pounding stray cows or ordering a dung-heap to be removed, the people of Dhupnagar would sleep all the sounder. Gangooly was preparing an angry answer, when a cry arose from the crowd that the Dipty was coming; and presently Preonath, the Deputy Magistrate, came trotting down the bazaar with half-a-dozen policemen at his heels.

"Where is that headman ?" he cried roughly, pulling up as he saw Gangooly. "Here, sir ! a fine pitch your administration of this village has brought matters to ! But I'll make short work of you as soon as Mr Eversley arrives. What have you to say about this business ?"

"My fathers have been headmen of Dhupnagar since the English obtained the stewardship of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa," began Gangooly, in a sulky voice, and with a shrug of the shoulders very unlike his usual obsequious manner towards his official superiors.

"Silence, fool, with your fathers ! It was for their great sins that they ever begot such an ass as you are," cried the Dipty, in a fury. "Have you made the Mussulman a prisoner? Is Afzul Khan arrested?"

"Certainly not," said Gangooly, firmly: "what harm has he done, besides swaggering a little, and now and then switching an upstart. I have no order from the Magistrate Sahib."

"No order! and you know that the fellow has been robbing and ravishing right and left. By the Linga! I believe that he has paid you to shield him. Take your watchmen and bring him bound to me within an hour at Kristo Baboo's house, or consider yourself dismissed from the headmanship of Dhupnagar."

"That will be as the Magistrate Sahib pleases," said Gangooly, stoutly. "You have your sepoys, and can make them arrest Afzul Khan if you want him. And *if* the Headman of Dhupnagar is to be kicked like a football by the son of old Ram Lall the oil-seller——"

"You lazy old rascal, you shall smart for this impudence!" cried Preonath, shaking with passion: "no other Deputy Magistrate in the service would have borne with your shortcomings as I have done. But I supersede you this instant—your powers are suspended until you can answer to the Magistrate Sahib for your negligence in office and for your insolence to me."

"You hear, my friends," said Gangooly—"you hear what he has said: until the Magistrate Sahib comes, I leave you to do as you like for me, and we shall then see whose face is the whiter."

"As for Afzul Khan, sir," said Mr R. C. Roy, stepping forward, "I shall prove his warrant for coming forward to clear himself at any time the magistrate may require."

"And who are you, pray?" demanded Preonath, sharply turning round on the speaker whose presence he had not noticed in his ill-humour; "and what warrant can you give me for yourself in the first place, I should like to know?"

"Allow me to hand you my card," said Mr Roy, taking out his pocket-book with a polite bow—"Mr R. C. Roy at your service: and as for warrant, I cannot pretend to many acquaintances here; but were my friend Lord Gotham present, or even Mr Justice Tremor, either of them would, I am certain, be most happy to satisfy you regarding my respectability."

"I have heard of you, sir," said Preonath, rather more civilly, "and have no need of further testimony to your merits; but you will excuse me saying that I see no need of your mixing yourself up in the affairs of this disturbed town. Afzul Khan is not a person who will do you any credit if you choose to take up his cause."

"I fear not," returned Mr Roy, readily: "no barrister ever gets much credit for bringing off an innocent man; it is only when you have got a thorough-paced rogue for a client, that you have to work your wits."

"You will want all the senses that you have got about you, then, to take Afzul Khan out of this scrape, else it shan't be my fault," said the Dipty to himself; and then he added aloud, "If the Mussulman is your client, Mr Roy, and you are willing to vouch for his appearance before the magistrate, Mr Eversley, this evening, I am willing to oblige you, and shall not seek to arrest him just now. But I warn you that you have got a bad case to defend."

"A man can but do his best," said Mr Roy, with affected modesty; "and in the meantime, Mr Deputy, permit me to give your worship good morning."

"I'll make you change your tune a few octaves, my friend, before I am done with you," said Mr Roy to himself, as he hurried after Gangooly, the headman, who was walking sulkily homewards. "And now, my worthy headman, see that you have all in readiness by the evening, and we'll rather surprise these good people."

"The brute! the low-caste pariah cur!" fumed Gangooly; "the son of an old oilman to dare to speak thus to me, whose fathers have been——"

"Most respectable men, I know," interrupted Mr Roy; "but never mind, you shall have your revenge before long, and let them laugh who win, as my friend Lord Gotham told the Lords when they rejected his bill for establishing dissenting denominations. Take good care of our prisoner, and be ready to produce him at the moment that I ask for him, and not an instant sooner."

Meanwhile the crowd had gathered round the Dipty, and were pouring into his ears all the complaints that they could recollect against Afzul Khan and Agha: their swaggering in the bazaar and annoyance of the lieges; the carrying off of the ryot of Milkiganj's daughter; their visits to Rutton Pal's, and their nocturnal prowlings; the suspicion that attached to them for the many robberies that had of late been committed in Dhupnagar; and now the abduction and murder of Kristo Baboo's daughter. To all these reports the Dipty listened with sympathising complacency; hoped they might be wrong in their suspicions, but acknowledged that a strong probability attached to the Muhammadan as the guilty party; exhorted them to repeat their charges to Mr Eversley when he came that evening; and expressed a hope to the village elders that they might be able to rid Dhupnagar of such turbulent pests as Afzul and Agha. In short, the Dipty, without saying so, gave the villagers clearly to understand that he quite sympathised with them in their prejudices against the Subadar's family, and that he would be ready to do all he could in assisting them to implicate Afzul.

"I hope you will let the Magistrate Sahib know all that you have told me," said the Dipty. "Do not let any fear of these ruffians keep you from speaking the whole truth about their misdeeds; for it will go hard with me if I do not prevent them from annoying you for some time to come. And now I must go to Kristo Baboo, and collect what evidence he has to give."

And the Dipty trotted his pony away to the house of Lahory, amid the murmured plaudits of the crowd, who thronged round Ram Lall, the oilman, to congratulate him upon that miracle of learning, and incarnation of justice, his worshipful son, whose fame had made Dhupnagar, his birthplace, great among cities, and whose wisdom was as the wisdom of Vrihaspati, the instructor of the gods. Although Preonath had not condescended to recognise his father among the villagers, the old man's heart swelled with joy, and he was more disposed to cry than he had felt since Brijonath, the father of Protap the accountant, had become bankrupt, and made him the loser of thirty-eight rupees. The old man went to tell Preonath's mother what the townsmen were saying of her son, in such high spirits, that he almost forgot to lament the loss of Gangooly's patronage; for it was certain that the headman, after his quarrel with the Dipty, would no longer have dealings with Preonath's father, but would send his jars to be filled by the oilman of Gapshapganj.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DEATH-FIRE ON THE GUNGAPUTRA.

KRISHNA woke from a brief slumber, broken by troubled dreams, and sprang from his couch raw and unrefreshed. The false dawn was just beginning to grey the sky away over the tall mango-trees on the Pagoda Tope, and the chill, dewy darkness still lay thick in the depths of the valley. He had tossed awake for many hours, and when at length his mind had wearied itself out in vain efforts to forecast a better future out of his present wreck of circumstances, and he had fallen asleep, it was only to be preyed upon by dreams which racked him more than the waking realities. Now Radha, in all her beauty, was leading him through flowery bowers, with sweet words and soft blandishments. Then the scene changed, and he was struggling vainly in the hands of Afzul Khan, who had tied the Linga of Dhupnagar round his neck, and was about to throw him from the high rock on Kalee Pagoda's point into the boiling eddies of the Gungaputra below, while

Chakwi vainly clung to the Mussulman's knees and implored mercy for her husband. A heave, a splash, and he was already suffocating in the waters, when he woke in his struggle with a cold sweat on his brow, and a choking sensation in his throat. It was the last morning that ever he would rise beneath the old roof-tree, and he felt as if he was bidding farewell to all the world of his old existence, and launching out into an unknown and threatening sea, with little knowledge whither his course might tend, and small hopes that it would lead him into a safe haven.

"Would that I might have kissed Chakwi before I left!" he said with a sigh, as he gathered together a few clothes and papers, and knit them up in his *chaddar* (cloak) into a small bundle; "and yet what needs it that I make her more miserable than she else would be? Poor girl! she will not forget me, I know, cruel though I have been; nor shall I fail to think of her. How many women are there whose love would have endured the neglect, the scorn, the loathing with which I have repaid her affection? But I was bewitched by the beauty of that treacherous one—falser than any *Petni** who sacrifices the belated traveller to gratify her passions. Dear Chakwi! her worth makes her now fairer to my mind than ever Radha could have been, even when I was in the hottest delirium of love for her.

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* The *Petnis* are a class of female ghosts who assail the virtue of benighted travellers. The unprepossessing appearance which the Bengalees attribute to them does not entitle their victims to much sympathy for the fate which overtakes them if they yield.

"No, I will not waken Chakwi," he said, as he took his bundle. "Thank Heaven, I still feel man enough to forbear from that. I will say farewell to my father and beg his blessing; it will help me lighter on the road if I can carry it away on my head. My dear father! would to God that we could have made our minds go together! but it is God that makes the wind blow whither He will."

Softly Krishna traversed the dark passage towards the *zenana,* pausing an instant at Chakwi's door to invoke a blessing upon his wife. But when he came to Ramanath's room the door was open and the apartment was empty.

"Poor father!" said Krishna, with a sigh, "his mind must have been as ill at ease as my own to be thus early astir. I shall find him in the temple, doubtless. And I have been the miserable cause of all this annoyance and anxiety to him, who before would never waken between midnight and cock-crow. I wish it were over, and I were out on the highroad."

The temple compound wore a grisly and ghost-like look in the cold morning air. The trees and bushes stood up in black undefined masses on a ground of watery grey, or if they did take shape to Krishna's excited eyes, it was the shapes of loathly spectres or forbidding monsters seeking to bar his path. The leaves of the sacred *peepul* tree, hanging like a dusky pall over the temple porch, quivered in the low wind, and murmured a dull, jarring dirge.

"Father!" cried Krishna, pausing at the foot of the steps—"father!" but the only answer to his call was the rustle of the *peepul* tree, and the faint moan of the wind as it blew into the temple door.

"Can he be there?" said Krishna to himself, as he went up the steps and looked into the temple porch. There was Ramanath's hookha standing against the wall, and so the priest was in all probability within.

"Father!" he again called, making a step forward into the darkness, and his voice rang strange and hollow under the arched roof of the temple porch; "father, are you there?" A vague sense of fear came over Krishna. His knees shook, and a cold sweat oozed from his brow. He caught by the temple lintel for support, and looked in towards the shrine. Darker than the darkness, two black objects met his eyes — one was the Linga of Dhupnagar, and prostrate before it lay stretched out at full length the rigid body of Ramanath the priest!

Nerved by the earnestness of alarm, which now took the place of his fear, Krishna entered and dropped down on one knee beside the priest's body. "Father dear," he said, laying his hand upon the motionless shoulder—"father dear, are you ill?" He took the hand, but it was cold and rigid, and fell stiffly to the ground as he relaxed his grasp. The truth flashed upon his mind, but he violently pushed it aside, and would not accept the testimony of his senses. "Father, speak to me!" he cried, as, taking the body in his arms, he hastily turned up the face. But in the morning twilight he could see that the seal of death was set hard and firm upon the old man's countenance, and the cheek which he kissed so passionately was cold and stiff as the stone floor beneath.

"Dead!" cried Krishna, letting go the body and burying his face in his father's bosom; "dead! and I not by to get his blessing. O God! it was cruel, cruel, that he should die thus alone and untended; no one to hold up his head that he might draw his last breath; no one to cool his lips when parched by the death-drought. And I so near, too. O God! it is bitter, bitter, to bear. It would not have been half so hard had I stood by him in his death-struggle!" And he kissed and fondled the cold distorted face and tried to pull the lids over the staring, sightless eyes, sobbing all the while as if his heart would break.

"What could have ailed him to die thus suddenly?" asked Krishna of himself. "It must have been some sudden attack: he was hale and healthy but yesterday afternoon. O God! I know now—I know—I am his murderer! The vexation and anxiety that I have caused have killed him. Wretch that I am, parricidal wretch, I have slain the best father that ever man had! O father, father! for the love of God speak to me and say that it was not so! Villain, and worse than villain, that I am, it is all my doing! What were their creeds and faiths that I should have lost so precious a love and broken so dear a heart for so airy and changeable a thing as an opinion! Would that I lay dead upon your breast, father, and that I were not left to be gnawed at my heart by a never-ending remorse!"

The darkness was melting away, and the brightening twilight in the temple door was suddenly interrupted as Krishna bent over his dead father, bathing the corpse's face with his tears. He turned suddenly round, and there stood Chakwi in the porch—Chakwi with shame-flushed face, and all her best ornaments on.

"I saw you go to the temple, and thought you meant to steal away," she began, hesitatingly; but her voice broke down and she commenced to tremble as her glance fell upon the body. "What—what is that?" she gasped, as she tottered forward, clutching wildly for support, and would have fallen had not Krishna sprung up and caught her tenderly in his arms. "Holy Mother Gunga!" she faltered, burying her face in her husband's bosom, and not daring to look again towards the corpse; "what evil is this that hath befallen him? Why is he thus?"

"Alas! Chakwi," said Krishna, clasping her in his arms, "he has gone from us: Yama, the god of death, has driven him off as a prey, and left us to lament his loss. My poor, poor child, you have lost your best friend as well as I have! he loved you well who lies there."

And while the girl clung sobbing to his bosom, Krishna told her how he had sought his father to say adieu to him and to beg his blessing, and found him cold before the Linga; and the two mingled their tears together.

"Yes, Chakwi," groaned Krishna, "but the worst is yet to be told. It is I—I, wretch that I am, that have done this. My waywardness and disobedience have broken his heart. He parted from me last night in passion, and the agitation has killed him. Oh that I might die with him, for I cannot live with such a load of guilt on my mind! Yes, Chakwi, I feel that I have murdered my father just as much as if my hands were red with his life-blood!"

"Nay, nay," said Chakwi, "it cannot be thus; doubtless the gods had doomed him to die, and when his hour had come, nothing that you could have done would have saved him. Comfort you, Krishna; what would become of the Thakoorani and me if you were to die next?"

"True, dearest Chakwi. Thank God that I have still something to live for! And oh, father! if you can hear me now whither you have gone, hear this vow that you desired so much while in life—I swear to do all that a miserable and unworthy wretch like me can do to deserve my wife's love, and to recompense her for my former wicked neglect."

The sun rose swiftly from behind the tall tree-tops and shot his rays through the temple door that he might be a witness to the vow. Seldom has the bright light of morning risen upon a stranger scene. There lay the stiff corpse of the priest, which looked still more ghastly in the sunshine, and over it stood breast to breast the young husband and wife, who for the first time had joined their hearts, purified by affliction, on that solemn occasion. And behind them was the Linga, black and grim, indifferent alike to love and death. And if the spirit of Ramanath could have looked down from the bright heaven of Siva high on the summit of Mount Koilasa, the most pleasant paradise of Hindoo fable, and seen the hopes which he had so long cherished on earth thus strangely realised, he would not have grudged the price which he had paid for the happiness of his children.

The funeral rites of Ramanath were performed that evening according to the orthodox rules of Hindooism, and in a manner befitting his social position. Gangooly was sent for and the death reported; and then for the first time the headman pointed out that the golden vase which Three Shells had presented to the shrine had disappeared. For this and for other reasons which he did not then specify, the worthy headman was strongly of opinion that the temple had been robbed, and promised that the matter and the priest's death should be carefully inquired into.

That evening a funeral pyre was lit upon the banks of the Gungaputra in a quiet corner near where the river comes circling round the green rice-fields and tall bamboos of Milkiganj. A weeping group consisting of Krishna, Chakwi, the Thakoorani, and the servants of the house, stood round the pile and performed with reverent care the last sad offices. There were few beside to mark their grief, for the death of Ramanath, the priest, had excited little notice compared with the abduction and supposed murder of Kristo Baboo's daughter, and Krishna was glad that their grief had escaped being a spectacle for the idle multitude. It was with a heavy heart and with doubtful hopes for the future that, when the pile had burned to the embers and the ashes had been cast upon the dark surface of the sacred waters, Krishna took the two sorrowing women by the hand and led them back to the house, lonely and cheerless enough to them in their bereavement, and full of associations that would each serve as a cause of renewed sorrow. And yet amid the gloom both Krishna and Chakwi had hope in their hearts. Like sailors off a rock-bound and stormy coast, who have caught the first flash of the beacon, they knew that there was a quiet haven beyond, and the dangers between, still to be faced, seemed less formidable than they were before. Chakwi now felt that she had gained her husband's love, although a dread haunted her that he might ever discover how she had, as she supposed, won him by a love-philtre. And Krishna, whose affections were open and bleeding at every point, felt her love to be as precious to him at such a moment as a healing balm.

Away up above the river, from under the shade of the *tal* (palmyra) trees, Three Shells, the mahajan, watched the funeral. He smiled exultingly as he saw the torch applied to the pile and the black smoke stretching across the river. The sweet smell of burning sandal-wood and perfumes came up from the bank, and Three Shells daintily held his fingers to his nostrils as if the odours were too heavy for him.

"That cloud of black smoke carries away with it my chief danger. I feel as safe now since Ramanath has gone away to the gods as if I sat under the shadow of the Commissioner Sahib himself. I shall sleep sound now of nights, and not waken in fright at feeling the hangman's hands round my throat. I can count my money now without any ugly thoughts of how it was come by. Ay, burn away there, Ramanath Gossain! It was an unlucky hour for you when you ever meddled in Three Shells' matters; you might else have been alive and well this even instead of smouldering away to ashes down there. But my secret burns with you, and, thanks to the needs of Gangooly, the only written record was in ashes before the writer. Panchoo and Tettoo did their work surely, the scoundrels. I wonder how they killed him, though? Strangled him with Tettoo's long fingers, I suppose. Well, well, it was better than using the knife. Thank the gods, my hands are clear of his blood! And now worthy Three

Shells will be able to enter upon the reward of his labours, and a goodly reward it is, worth no little plotting and scheming to compass. The Ghatghar Palace looks fair in the setting sun. In a few weeks more I shall know if the setting sun looks as fair from the Ghatghar Palace, for the rajah will be a beggar and a dependent upon my bounty as soon as I say the word. Yes, Three Shells, the Zemindar of Ghatghar, will be a somewhat different man from Three Shells, the village money-lender. And I shall deserve it, for I shall give the gods their due, however hardly I may deal with man. And I shall marry, too, for I do not believe that Kristo Baboo's daughter is murdered. Not she—some of these scrapes that women are always getting into. Well, well! a crack in the cup generally makes the possessor more ready to part with it, and I am not a particular man. I shall make the people keep their distance from this day forth, and pay me the respect due to a great Bengal landholder—yes, to the man who owns most of the land that his eyes rest upon. I daresay I shall soon be able to buy out these Mussulmans. If the son be brought to disgrace, as I hope he will, they will not care to remain in Dhupnagar. Then there are the Gossain lands. Um! Krishna Baboo, with his Europe fashions, may soon make them less bulky. Ah! Three Shells, you were born under a propitious star, for great is the good fortune before you. I shall build a female school, for that always makes a man honoured in the eyes of the Sahibs, even if he were the greatest rack-renter and oppressor in the country. Yes, yes, I will fall into the English follies, and who knows what may come of it? I may be made a Rae Bahadoor some day. I shall make up to the Magistrate Sahib this very evening when he comes to hold *cutcherry* at Dhupnagar. Aha! the funeral fire is burning low, and I must back to the village to hear what is to be done with Afzul Khan. Good-bye, Ramanath; every puff of smoke that rises from your pyre takes up a weight of fear from off my heart."

Three Shells turned away in the direction of the village along the jungle path, with as much affectation of importance as it was possible to put upon his lean limbs. He held his head high, took long strides, and advanced his gold-headed cane with a pompous motion, saying to himself whenever the Ghatghar Palace appeared through the jungle, "Oh, fortunate Three Shells! what a bright future is before you!"

CHAPTER XLV.

A HINDOO FATHER.

LONG before the hour appointed for investigating the robberies and the abduction of Kristo Baboo's daughter, the good people of Dhupnagar had begun to gather in crowds upon the village green. The traders, feeling that it was useless to expect custom while men's minds were so excited, soon shut up their shops and followed, old Ram Lall last of all, to the place of meeting. The news had gone abroad that a great trial was to take place at Dhupnagar, and the ryots round about had flocked into the village through curiosity, while even one or two pleaders and perjurers from Gapshapganj had scented business, and come down to see if their services were required. Jaddoo, the Dipty's orderly, and four or five other of the court hangers-on, were strutting about, giving themselves all the airs which little men's great men usually assume in the presence of their master's inferiors. Under the banyan tree stood the usual group of village elders, with faces lengthened out to comport with the serious business which had brought them together.

"Surely the end of this age approaches," said Dwarkanath the schoolmaster, solemnly shaking his head. "There has been no such night in Dhupnagar since, as I have heard my grandfather say, the Mahrattas threatened to come down the valley. That was in *his* grandfather's time, and their armies came down through the Passes of Panch Pahar, and but that the Gungaputra was swollen by the blessing of Huree, and no horse could ride the ford, they would have plundered Dhupnagar and the whole valley below it."

"Ay, it is indeed a judgment-like time," said Nitye the *Kobi-raj* or doctor; "and what wonder though the gods should punish us for our wickedness? There is that impious young Rajah of Ghatghar, who sent his child to Hooghly to be vaccinated by the unclean hands of an Europe-bred physician instead of purchasing from me a charm and a prayer to the goddess *Shîtula*, which has always proved of unfailing efficacy, save only where the gods had expressly ordained that the person was to die of small-pox."

"Ay, and the profane learning which has crept in among us from those Feringhees," groaned Dwarkanath. "I consider the sudden death of our friend Ramanath the priest as a direct punishment from the gods for allowing his son to attend English schools, where they are taught to deride caste and despise the gods. It ought to be a warning to all of you."

"And what," asked Protap the accountant, "is to become of the Linga? Can an infidel like Krishna be trusted with the care of so holy a relic? We might as well give the Temple to a Christian at once. It is my opinion that the Linga would soon lose its power if it got into Krishna's hands."

"Yes, and then where would Dhupnagar be?" asked Shama Churn the grain-seller. "Does not the village live by the Linga? With no pilgrims to the shrine, and no annual fair, bats may soon build in the bazaar, and jungle grow in the middle of the street."

"Nay," said Three Shells, "if Krishna will not take upon him all the duties of the Temple, and perform them properly, we shall cast about us and get another priest. The lands belong to the temple, and if Krishna will not serve the shrine he shall not hold the property. Poor as I am, I shall give my mite to get their due for the gods, though we should have to go to law for it."

"Ah, sir," said Prosunno the lawyer, who saw a prospect of a case, "what a comfort it is to have a man of such piety and god-fearing principles among us! Surely there will be good grounds for turning Krishna out of the Temple as an unfit guardian, and placing the property under proper management. I have not the means of the honoured Three Shells the mahajan, but what assistance my poor knowledge of law enables me to render will be willingly given for the good of the village."

"'Let me make peace between you, neighbours,' said the jackal when the ducks fell out," interrupted Gangooly, the village headman, as he joined the group, with a temper rather ruffled by the indignant complaints which the villagers had been making in his hearing regarding his apathy in not seizing the Muhammadans. "Verily, friend Prosunno, if you had your way you would have us all at each other's throats before many months were over."

"Yes, and much would you do to preserve the peace," sneered Prosunno. "A headman who is afraid to seize a thief and ravisher on broad daylight, with half the village to aid in the capture, does well to talk of preserving the peace. Bah! as well have a dish of curds or a crow for headman of Dhupnagar."

"My fathers were headmen of Dhupnagar years before your leather-skinning ancestors entered the valley, driven by slippers from their own village," retorted Gangooly; "and I will be headman of Dhupnagar after you have been hanged, Prosunno, as many a more honest man has been, unless I am much mistaken."

"Peace, Mr Headman," said Three Shells, sternly; "your office gives you no power to insult your superiors. It would better become you to take words of humility into your mouth, and to beg us to use our good words with the worthy Dipty in your behalf, else you are like to be turned out of your post for remissness, although your fathers have been headmen of

Dhupnagar for so long as you are always dinning into our ears."

"Let others look to their posts," said the bumptious Gangooly, "I warrant mine waits for me; and, worthy Three Shells, I give you notice that to-morrow I shall redeem that packet which I placed in your hands for safety. It contains Ramanath's instructions for the disposal of the Temple property, and for carrying on the worship of the Linga, and will save you gentlemen the trouble of arranging the matter, and Prosunno the bother of looking up his law books upon the subject."

A white paleness came over Three Shells' face as the headman spoke, and his countenance, always cadaverous, assumed the hue of a badly whitewashed tombstone. "The packet in my hands had—that is, has nothing to do with the priest's property. It related, so Ramanath told me, to an entirely other matter."

"He told you wrong then," said Gangooly, "for he told me not many days before his death that it was his will; and he asked me, moreover, to return it, as he wished to make some alterations in it."

"Yes," said Three Shells, endeavouring to assume a forced boldness, "he knew that I had the packet and asked me to destroy it, as he was going to make another will. He also said that he would explain to you what he had asked me to do, and he guaranteed that he would see you pay the money for which the packet had been pledged."

"I heard nothing of all this," said Gangooly; "but not a pice of principal or interest shall you ever get out of me unless the packet be forthcoming. I shall speak to the Magistrate Sahib Eversley about it this very night;"—and Gangooly, attended by his two ancient watchmen, Hurree and Lutchmun, went down the road towards Walesbyganj.

And now a cry arose from the outskirts of the crowd that the Magistrate Sahib was coming, and a general rush took place towards that corner of the village green whence a view of the Bhutpore road was to be had. The ponies of three or four of the court officials, and some eight or nine orderlies racing at their heels, were seen coming down the valley amid a cloud of dust. At the sight of the cavalcade the Dhupnagar villagers gave vent to a murmur of excitement, and Rutton Pal, who had got his broken head bandaged up, and had deadened the pain by drinking an unusually large quantity of his own spirits, began to bawl out, "Justice, justice, the justice of the Company, oh Magistrate Sahib!"

Inside the compound of Kristo Baboo's house, in front of the family idol room, stood the Baboo himself and Preonath the Dipty. A few hours of agonised uncertainty had wrought a marked change upon Kristo's face. The plump, proud, self-satisfied expression was gone, and he now looked years older; his countenance was haggard and worn, his hair was standing on his head in disordered locks, and his eyes seemed to stare straight forward into vacancy, save when they were kindled up with an angry tiger-like flash as the Dipty spoke. He looked as if a sorceress had just struck him into stone, and as if the fiercer passions of human nature were last of all the others beginning to yield to the metamorphosis.

The disappearance of Radha had been discovered at a very early hour in the morning. Tukht Singh the porter, who had been bribed to let the girls out, became alarmed when they did not return, and as day broke, he began to bethink himself how he would answer to the Baboo for having allowed them to leave the house. A lie was the readiest resource, and to concoct one, Tukht Singh at once set his not very brilliant wits to work. So when the Baboo began to stir, the porter waited on him, and with troubled countenance told him of a sight which he had witnessed, as he said, during the night. Hearing a noise, he averred, on the east side of the house immediately under the *zenana* window, he had gone round to see that no robbers were about, and had seen two female figures, and as he thought, one or two men, disappear in the darkness Running back to chain up the entry-door, lest thieves might break in during the time he was pursuing the others, he had lost sight of the figures, and had not been able to see whither they went. On consideration, he thought that the men, so far as he could make them out, were like the young Mussulman Afzul Khan and his gang.

Kristo's first care had been to dismiss the man from the room, and to go straight to the *zenana.* A single glance was sufficient to convince him that something was wrong, but that there had been no thieves in the house. Radha's jewel-box was untouched, and her richest robes lying about the room. But it was equally clear that both Radha and Sukheena had fled, for there was nothing broken, nothing disordered, that would warrant him in supposing that they had been carried off against their will. It is but fair to Kristo as a Hindoo parent to state that his first thought was of the family disgrace, even before he felt any fatherly alarm about Radha's fate. Whether she had been carried away or had gone of her own free will, was a matter of secondary importance. In either case, her reputation was broken, and her only chance of marriage gone; and the honour of the Lahories, which he had guarded so tenderly—which he had pinched himself, and had ground the faces of his tenants, to keep up—was now tarnished beyond the possibility of ever being cleared again. There was only one hope that Kristo clung to with all the fierceness of a passionate nature, now roused into savageness, and that was, that Afzul Khan, the son of the man who now held the old family lands of the Lahories, the man whom of all other men he hated most, might have been the robber of his money and the abductor of his daughter. Kristo felt that to see Afzul Khan on his way in chains to the Andamans, he would nearly let his daughter go; and so he lost no time in sending messengers to Mr Eversley and the Dipty, informing them of his loss, and charging the young Muhammadan as the guilty person.

Luckily for the few remnants of fatherly feeling that Kristo had about him, he did not hear of the pool of blood on the Gapshapganj road until after the Dipty's arrival, and Preonath had sufficient information of what had taken place to enable him to assure Kristo that his daughter's life was safe, and that she was in no immediate danger.

The indefatigable Jaddoo, in the exercise of his detective functions, had watched Radha and Sukheena enter the Subadar's house, and after waiting most of the night expecting them to return home, had posted off to the Dipty to communicate what he had seen. Preonath was thus prepared for the intelligence which Kristo's breathless messenger brought him, and, with his usual decision, had made up his mind as to the course which he was to take. That Radha loved the Mussulman, he had previously known, as well as he knew that she cared nothing for either himself or Krishna. He had hoped, however, that he would be able to put Afzul Khan out of the way, and that he might succeed in concocting such a case against him as would get penal servitude, or a couple of years' imprisonment at the least, for the young Muhammadan. He had slowly been weaving his meshes about Afzul Khan, and joining link to link of circumstantial evidence, which he trusted would soon become a chain heavy enough to keep his rival out of the way.

The flight of Radha was, however, an event unforeseen in his calculations, and rather staggered the Dipty amid his plans. It was true that the fact of her having fled to Walesbyganj, strengthened the suspicion against Afzul Khan as the robber of Kristo's money, and might perhaps enable a charge of forcible abduction to be conjoined with that of the theft. But how was Radha herself affected? She would, of course, be got back from the Mussulman, a good deal damaged in reputation, but still young and beautiful, and the daughter of a high-caste Brahmin. Preonath was a thoroughly practical man of the world, and as little disposed to yield to sentiment as any utilitarian need be. If any slur should rest upon Radha's character, her high caste would soon cause it to be glossed over. Kites will not pick out kites' eyes, or a Brahmin see a spot upon a Brahmin's *chaddar* (cloak), says the proverb; and the Dipty did not intend to let Radha's escapade stand between him and a wife from a high-caste family. It would even make matters more easy for him, for the Dipty could not conceal from himself that Kristo had always been averse to give his daughter in marriage to the son of an oil-seller, and that the Baboo had never been sincere in the encouragement which he had professed to hold out to him. And so Preonath had made up his mind to turn the present opportunity for securing the Baboo's consent, providing Radha were restored and Afzul convicted, to good account in the furtherance of his matrimonial designs.

He found Kristo settling down from his first outbreak of anger into a sullen determination for revenge. He had relieved his wrath by slippering Tukht Singh the porter, a sturdy Rajpoot who could have eaten the puffy Bengalee, but who was too prudent to quarrel with the purse-bearer, and who took his beating with a good grace and shuffled out of his master's reach as soon as possible. He then called the servants and began to examine them as to what they knew about Afzul Khan's visits to the House of Lahory. Tukht Singh, the porter, still rubbing his bones after the beating, deposed that he was sure it was Afzul Khan whom he had seen the night before, and he was prepared to swear over Ganges' water, that he had recognised the young Muhammadan about the Baboo's compound after nightfall scores of times. Jotee Lall, the bearer, was certain that it was Afzul Khan who had crossed the road from the House of Lahory in thief-like fashion, the night when the Baboo's safe was robbed; and little Nao Nihal, the Baboo's messenger, not to be outdone, was ready to swear by the Linga of Dhupnagar that he had seen Afzul Khan with a money-bag beneath his arm the same night, until Prem Singh, Kristo's *sirdar*, or headman, reminded him that he was absent from Dhupnagar on a visit to his brother at Burdwan at the time in question, when he prudently held his peace.

"You hear, Baboo," said Kristo to the Dipty, after the latter had offered his sympathy, and heard all that was adducible against Afzul Khan; "what can be plainer than that the Muhammadan is the thief? If justice be left in the land he ought to hang for it."

"Scarcely that," said the Dipty; "but fear not, sir, he shall be amply punished for his crimes. I have had my eye upon him for months past, and my officers have watched his steps night and day. The Sessions Judge will send him over black water (transportation) without doubt. But what of your daughter? How are you to do about the recovery of her?"

"What care I for her now?" said Kristo, fiercely; "she is my daughter no longer. Do you think that she can come back to me pure and stainless as she was before, from the hands of an unclean Mussulman jackal. I tell you, Baboo, my daughter is as much dead to me as if he had cut her throat; and, therefore, I say that the villain ought to be hanged!"

"But hear me," said Preonath, laying his hand upon Kristo's arm; "if your daughter could be got back with as little noise as possible, she might yet be able to make an advantageous match; that is, if you were still willing to recognise her as your daughter."

"The only fitting match that she can find now would be Yama, the god of death, who has a salve for all shame," said Kristo, gloomily; "but if you still want her for your wife, you are welcome to her, provided you can avenge me upon that blackguard who stole my money, and whose still more rascally father robbed me of my land. If you can do this for me, Mr Dipty, you may do about the damsel as you like. She can never marry in her own caste after this, and Mussulman or oil-seller may have her who list, for all the trouble that I shall take about her."

Preonath did not then choose to notice the offensive allusion to his father's profession, but answered readily enough: "Then, sir, I may consider that I have your promise to give me the maiden, if we can get her back safe and sound from the Muhammadans, and Afzul Khan convicted?"

"If you could hang that scoundrel you might have my own head," cried Kristo; "and look you, Preonath, the Government ought to take away Shamsuddeen Khan's lands for his son's crimes; and just hint to the Magistrate Sahib that it would be only just and meet, considering how much I have suffered, if I were to get back that portion of which I was despoiled. Tell him that, Preonath."

"I shall—I shall," answered Preonath, hastily, as he moved away to escape Kristo's unreasonable requests. "I shall let you know when it is time to attend the Magistrate Sahib. And your servants will swear to Afzul Khan's guilt? Be sure of that, Baboo."

"By the Linga of Dhupnâgar, they had better," growled Kristo; "if they don't swear that fellow's neck into a rope, they needn't look for more rice from my storehouse."

The Dipty hurried away, for, unscrupulous as he was, he did not care to hear too much regarding the description of the evidence which Kristo meant to put forward. He crossed the village green where several of the magistrate's great men had already arrived, and shook hands cordially with the *Nazir,* or court sheriff, —a huge corpulent Bengalee, with big paunch, and spectacles inserted in those cavities in his puffy face where the eyes would naturally be; the inspector of police in huge red turban and bright blue *chapkan* (coat); the *munshi* or interpreter, a venerable old Mussulman, whose office was almost a sinecure under a magistrate who knew the native languages so well as Mr Eversley did. With these gentlemen Preonath was upon terms the most intimate and confidential. Between these worthies a league existed which was not always employed to serve the interests of justice. If any cases were removed to the Bhutpore cutcherry (courthouse) from Preonath's jurisdiction, his friends, the *amla* (court officials), would naturally do their best to forward any wish that the Dipty might have regarding their disposal. In his turn Preonath was always ready to serve the friends of the *amla* when they got into trouble. And so upon the present occasion the Dipty and the officials at once fell into earnest and confidential conversation.

"You need not come here, friend," cried Preonath, haughtily, as Gangooly approached the group. "You deserve to lose your appointment for your laziness and insolence; nevertheless I shall speak to the Magistrate Sahib on your behalf. I have no wish to be hard on an old townsman."

"My fathers were headmen of Dhupnagar since the English got the *Dewanny* of Bengal, Behar, and Orissa," said Gangooly, contemptuously turning away, "and never wanted the good word of an oil-seller's son, nor yet shall I;" and the old headman, followed by his guards Lutchmun and Hurree, stalked sturdily away among the crowd with back turned broad upon the indignant Dipty, who vowed to himself, by all the gods in the Hindoo pantheon, that he would make the old man repent his insolence.

Another cry was now raised by the crowd, and the Magistrate Sahib could be plainly seen coming powdering down the Bhutpore road, in the middle of a cloud of white dust. There was no rider on the long course of the Gungaputra who had a better seat in the saddle than Mr Eversley, and not even Afzul Khan himself rode with more headlong speed when he was mounted. The Dipty and the court officials hurried off to make ready for the Magistrate's reception, and the crowd began to press towards the shade of the great *goolmohur* tree, from beneath which justice had been administered in Dhupnagar for ages long before the recollection of the oldest inhabitant.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MOFUSSIL JUSTICE.

UNDER the thick shade of a tall *gool-mohur* tree which formed a leafy canopy of green and gnarled grey, a chair and a table were placed for the Magistrate. Mr Eversley was no lover of the pomp and circumstance of justice, and would sneer at the state in which Mr Muffington Prig was wont to carry on his magisterial investigations. Round about stood the court officials from Bhutpore, with the Dipty and his men. The front places in the crowd were taken up by the village elders, among whom Three Shells in his finest clothes had managed to thrust himself forward to a place close to the Magistrate's chair. At a little distance off stood the Muhammadans from Walesbyganj, who made their appearance on the village green shortly after the approach of the Magistrate had been announced. They were headed by the Subadar in his best uniform, who leaned upon Afzul's arm and guided his steps by his silver hilted sword in the other hand. Afzul seemed pale and shaken by his recent indisposition, but looked round upon the crowd with an expression of contemptuous indifference. Behind came Agha with sword and dagger, casting wicked looks about him, as if nothing would please him so much as a fair pretext for a fray. The crowd growled and cast angry glances at them, but those who stood nearest prudently held their peace, and moved as far as possible away from the Khyberee. Rutton Pal, who was now more than half drunk, did indeed bawl, "Down with the Mussulmans! down with the kine-killers!" but the villagers very judiciously refrained from irritating men who were armed with both sword and dagger.

At length the clatter of horse's hoofs was heard in the bazaar, and the Magistrate dashed round the corner, and pulled up at the edge of the crowd. Half-a-dozen obsequious hands seized the bridle, while as many sought to render the somewhat unnecessary service of holding the stirrup. Thwack, thwack! thud, thud! went the staves of the constables upon the heads of the crowd, as they cleared a path for the Magistrate towards his seat; and amid salaams and prayers for his prosperity, Mr Eversley reached his primitive tribunal.

"Well, headman," he said, as he noticed Gangooly, who in spite of the Dipty's efforts to hold him back, had pushed himself, salaaming and invoking blessings, into the Magistrate's presence, "any tigers about just now?"

"*Huzur* (your honour)," said Gangooly, raising his joined hands to a level with his face; "by your good fortune, not one. What tiger is there so foolish as to trust itself within shot of Eversley Sahib's rifle? The very man-eaters know the district boundary, and stop short when they come to it."

Mr Eversley laughed a short chuckle of satisfaction, and then turned round to greet Shamsuddeen Khan, the Subadar, whom he invited to sit by him.

"Nay, Sahib," said the old man; "but I bring you my son to answer for any fault that you may have to lay to him; and if he be innocent, I pray you to justify us upon those infidel swine who have traduced his name and mine. Stand forward, Afzul!"

"He shall have all fair play," said the magistrate, seating himself as Afzul came forward and made his salaam. "*Ag lao*" (bring fire); and after lighting his cheroot, the magistrate proceeded to open the investigation.

Preonath now presented himself with a bundle of papers in his hand. "Your honour," he said, "is already acquainted with the general nature of the charges against the prisoner, and I shall not detain you with going over what you already know. I shall call witnesses who will, I presume, show your honour grounds for committing Afzul Khan for trial by the Sessions-Judge on a charge of housebreaking, in order to the commission of theft, under the 'Penal Code,' Chap. xvii., sec. 454; on another of dishonestly breaking open a closed receptacle containing property in the house of

Baboo Kristo Doss Lahory, under sec. 461 of the same Code; and, finally, of belonging to a gang of persons associated for the purpose of habitually committing dacoity (robbery), sec. 400, same chapter. Should Baboo Kristo Doss Lahory wish to prosecute, I understand he can bring a charge against the prisoner of abducting his daughter to compel her marriage, or to cause her defilement, under the Code, Chap. xvi., sec. 366."

"Very fair; very, indeed, for a provincial," said Mr R. C. Roy in a whisper to Gangooly; "but just wait until *I* get in."

"And if the Baboo can prove this charge, why does he not bring it?" asked the Magistrate. "Is Baboo Kristo Doss here himself?"

Here a whispered colloquy took place between the Dipty and Kristo. "Better keep quiet," urged the former; "if we can convict him of the robbery we may get Radha back without any further uproar or scandal, and this blot upon you will be all the more easily washed out."

"Sri Krishna-ji," muttered the Baboo; "provided you get him punished what do I care? And do not forget to ask the Magistrate to take back my land from the Mussulman and restore it to the rightful owner."

"Yes, sir, yes," said Preonath, hurriedly, and again addressed the Magistrate. "The Baboo, your honour, does not think it expedient to put forward the charge of abduction on the present occasion, but reserves the power to bring it up, if needful, when the proofs are complete. I shall now submit the evidence on which the other charges rest: and, first, I must explain to your honour that I found the headman of Dhupnagar so lazy and incompetent, and so afraid of the prisoner, that I was compelled to pass him aside in this case, and to have the motions of the prisoner watched by one of my own men."

"Oh, Incarnation of Justice!" interrupted Gangooly; "my fathers have been headmen of Dhupnagar——"

"Silence, headman," ordered Mr Eversley; "you will be heard again if you have anything to say; and you sir," he added, turning to Afzul, "will, I suppose, plead not guilty, and are, I hope, prepared with witnesses to establish your innocence."

"May it please your worship," said Mr Roy, stepping forward, "I appear on behalf of the prisoner."

"The devil you do!" said Mr Eversley, taking his cigar from his mouth, and opening his eyes at the unexpected appearance of a native in gown and bands, which Mr Roy, ever anxious to show off his professional costume to the eyes of his admiring countrymen, had donned in honour of the occasion; "and who may you be, pray?"

"A poor barrister of the Temple," said Mr Roy, with a bow. "I am well known to Lord Gotham, and many of the other members of the Upper House, in your worship's country. Let me have the honour of introducing myself to your worship;" and he laid before the Magistrate a large piece of pasteboard containing his name and the many titles which universities and learned societies had conferred upon him. The magistrate sniffed, and looked from the card to the counsel, and with a dry, dissatisfied "Umph," nodded to the Dipty to proceed.

"Baboo Kristo Doss Lahory will now, your honour, state the losses that he has sustained, and the facts which lead him to believe that the prisoner is the guilty party," said Preonath, nodding to the Baboo to come forward.

Kristo's evidence, when it came to be digested, did not count for much. He told how he had got a bag of ten thousand rupees from Three Shells, and how, though he had locked it up over night, it had all disappeared before morning. And what made him suspect Afzul Khan, the Magistrate had asked. Why, every one knew that the Muhammadan was the thief. Had he not been seen prowling about the premises? Did not the whole village know him as a loose-liver and a *budmash* (bad fellow)? Was there not the case of the Ryot of Milkiganj's daughter, and—— Here the Dipty interrupted him in time to prevent the introduction of Radha into the evidence.

"You saw Afzul Khan, I believe, lurking about your house on the night in question," said Preonath, with a meaning look at Kristo; "I suppose you are prepared to swear to that."

"You will observe, sir," said Mr Roy, "the form in which the question is put. If I were not conscious of my client's innocence, I would object to such leading. As it is, if your worship thinks it proper, I have no objection."

"It is improper," said the Magistrate: "let the witness say if he himself ever saw Afzul Khan about his house at suspicious hours."

A feeling of pride kept Kristo from uttering the lie that was on his lips, much as he would have liked to tell it: no, he never had seen Afzul Khan about his house, either late or early. Had he done so, his servant should have driven him forth as they would drive out an intruding dog. What testimony, then, was he prepared to give of his own knowledge that Afzul was the robber? What testimony was needed? Did not the whole village know it? Let the Magistrate Sahib ask any one, if he doubted his (Kristo Baboo's) word. Had not the Muhammadans been thieves and robbers from the very hour of their coming to Dhupnagar? Was not the very land upon which they lived by right his (Kristo's) property? The Dipty saw that it was high time to close Kristo's examination, and hastily said that he had no more to ask.

"Do you wish to cross-examine the witness?" asked the Magistrate, turning to Mr Roy: but that gentleman blandly said that he had nothing to ask of him; much to the relief of Preonath, who began to think that he had got a very easy-going antagonist.

"That a lawyer!" whispered Prosunno in the ear of his patron Three Shells. "If he had known anything of his business, he would not have left Kristo Baboo a leg to stand on. It is quite clear that the Baboo has no proof to go upon; he only suspects the Muhammadan."

"He is right all the same," said the mahajan, very decidedly. "I would swear myself that it was Afzul Khan."

But if Kristo's evidence did not throw much light upon the case, the Dipty had great reason to congratulate himself upon the next witnesses. Tukht Singh swore by Ganges water, or by any other oath that the magistrate would prefer, that he had seen Afzul prowling about the Baboo's premises, that he saw him on the night of the robbery, and to the best of his belief he was concealing something beneath his arm. Would he swear that he had seen the prisoner with a bag? swear, to be sure he would: was he not their slave; was it not his duty to swear to anything that they wished of him. Here the Magistrate explained that all they wanted was to get at the truth, and that if he swerved either to the one side or the other, he would be punished. Very well, he saw Afzul Khan, all the same, creep out from the Baboo's compound the night of the robbery, and he was certain he had something below his arm.

That was all the Dipty had to ask him, and he might stand aside, unless, added Preonath, the prisoner's counsel had any questions to put. But no:

Mr Roy appeared quite satisfied with Tukht Singh's evidence, and the man was allowed to go.

Then other servants of Kristo were examined, and all of them testified to having seen Afzul loitering about the house at untimely hours, and two of them positively swore that they had seen him on the night of the robbery. Still Mr Roy appeared quite indifferent to the evidence, and blandly refused to cross-examine any of the witnesses.

But the chief part of the drama had been reserved for Jaddoo, the Dipty's follower, who lied with a circumspection and minuteness that only a master in the art could have manifested. He had been despatched by the Dipty Baboo on such a day to endeavour to discover who was committing the robberies about Dhupnagar. He began his investigations on such a day. He found a strong suspicion existing that some one of the Walesbyganj Mussulmans was the thief, and a discovery which he had soon after made proved it to be correct. What was that discovery? He found out that the prisoner and his servant Agha were in the habit of resorting to Rutton Pal's to drink, and he concealed himself on the veranda in order that he might hear what they said. And what did he hear? He heard them plan a night attack upon Kristo's house. They were to dress themselves as Sonthals, and make the people believe that they were about a torch-light dacoity (robbery). Why did he not inform the Deputy Magistrate of this plot, Mr Eversley asked? Because he, Jaddoo, had been ordered to stay at Dhupnagar until he had found out all about the robberies; and he had thought that he had better try to learn something more about them before he presented himself to the Dipty. Was it not likely that if he had told in time what he had heard, the robbery from Kristo's house might have been prevented? What did he know? he was a poor ignorant man, and his knowledge, compared to his lordship's wisdom, was as a grain of sand to Mount Meru; and Jaddoo spread himself out before the Magistrate as he would challenge any imputation on his simplicity and truthfulness. Yes, he had often seen Afzul Khan about the Baboo's house. He remembered the night of the robbery perfectly. What did he see on that night? He saw Afzul Khan steal out of the Baboo's compound with a bag beneath his arm. The size of the bag was such as would hold ten thousand rupees. He would swear most positively that he saw Afzul with the bag; why should he lie about it? Why did he not call the village watch and seize him on the spot? The village watch indeed! He had called and knocked at Gangooly the headman's door for more than an hour, and no one had come to him.

"Oh shameless son of a lascivious mother and brother of harlots," cried Gangooly, losing his temper and forgetting the Magistrate's presence; but those behind him instantly dragged him back, and stopped his mouth.

Again and again the Magistrate went over Jaddoo's evidence, and carefully sifted every statement, and made him reiterate each particular in a variety of forms. But Jaddoo had got his lesson too well to be shaken, and the result was that the guilt of Afzul became more and more certain.

Would the counsel for the prisoner wish to put any questions? No, the counsel for the prisoner did not think that he had anything to ask. The witness seemed a most intelligent man, and had given his evidence with great clearness. How long had he been employed by the Dipty Baboo?

"Eight months."

"And an orderly already! You must have been a clever man to have risen so quickly. And had your master the Dipty no other commissions for you to execute? Did he never send love messages by you to Kristo Baboo's daughter?"

The Dipty flushed up to the eyes, and the Magistrate started and took the cigar from his mouth, while he waited for an answer.

"Never," said Jaddoo, looking the picture of astonished simplicity; "I swear it by the Linga of Dhupnagar."

"That will do, Jaddoo," said Mr Roy, benignantly: "I have no doubt you will be a most valuable public servant, Jaddoo, and that you will rise to be a *nazir* (sheriff) or a *sheristadar* (recorder), if indeed your virtues do not secure for you an exaltation of a very different kind. You're a model witness, Jaddoo, and I never met a man whose testimony would be more useful to back up a bad brief."

"I believe, sir," said Preonath, "I may tell the counsel for the prisoner that he will not assist his client by throwing out insinuations respecting myself, as unfounded as they are malicious, and by insulting witnesses whose credibility he does not even attempt to shake."

"He is doing no good at any rate," grumbled the Magistrate to himself. "The poor lad might as well have had my *khitmutgar* to defend him as this *hybrid* popinjay; unless he wishes his client to be convicted, I don't know what he is driving at. I shall have to commit the poor boy, that is certain, and yet I can hardly believe that he is guilty."

"That," said Preonath, "will be our case, your honour, and it is for you to consider whether the facts which we have shown do not warrant you in committing him for trial, and for declining any offers that may be made of bail. As I hinted, there are other and even graver charges which might be preferred, and which may be stated at the trial before the Sessions Judge. Meantime I think the village and the district ought to be congratulated that so dangerous a character has been detected before he had an opportunity of committing further crimes."

A buzz of applause indicated the concurrence of the villagers in Preonath's remarks, and many whispered compliments were poured into the ears of the Deputy

Magistrate by those who stood next him, among whom Three Shells was extravagant in his praises. The heart of old Ram Lall the oilman was so much gratified by the flattering words regarding his clever son which were poured into his ears, that he could scarcely contain himself until the trial was over from rushing home to tell his wife, although Preonath had not deigned to recognise his presence in the crowd that day.

A short pause occurred, during which the Magistrate wrote a few notes of the case with a clouded brow, and whispered something to the Sherishtadar who stood beside him. The silence lasted, however, only for a moment, for Rutton Pal, who had that day drunk much more liquor than he had sold, made his way through the throng and threw himself down before Mr Eversley. "Justice, protector of the poor! the Company's justice on the kine-killers."

"Who the deuce are you, fellow?" cried Mr Eversley angrily; "off with you before you get your bones well bambooed. Who is the man?"

"Rutton Pal the spirit-seller," cried half-a-score of voices.

"Well, then, bundle him out of this, and souse him in the nearest tank until he be sober. The rascal is as drunk as an owl. Bring another light here."

CHAPTER XLVII.

GANGOOLY IN THE WITNESS-BOX.

"Now sir," said Mr Eversley, lighting a fresh cheroot, "we shall hear what you have to say for the prisoner."

Mr R. C. Roy stepped forward and made a theatrical bow to the Magistrate, settled his wig, pulled his gown up on his shoulders in the most approved bar fashion, rolled up an old *Bengal Hurkaru* which was to do duty for his brief, coughed and looked round upon the audience to mark what impression he had made, attempted another cough, and having failed in that, made the Magistrate a still lower bow than before.

"A pretty counsel!" muttered Mr Eversley to himself. "It is almost enough to make one believe in Darwin. I must give the Subadar a hint to employ some decent lawyer before the Sessions trial comes on."

"If, sir," began Mr Roy, stretching out his arm in an Edmund Burke attitude—"if there is one consideration more than another that tends to dispel the diffidence which I feel in pleading this cause, it is the knowledge that I address myself to one who, despising those meretricious graces the draperies and the ornaments, with which eloquence too often seeks to bedeck the naked truth, has no other desire except to find out the right and to do justly by the innocent. To your worship I therefore address myself with full confidence in behalf of my client, satisfied that the colour of guilt which circumstances and the machinations of his enemies and rivals have for a moment given to his actions, will speedily disappear before your penetrating gaze. I would ask of your worship the very reverse of the request which Cicero made to the judges. It very much concerns you, said the great orator to the Bench while pleading for the life and fortune of a client, that the cause of respectable men should not be judged of from the animosity or levity of witnesses, but that every man's own life should be a voucher for him. That this principle, excellent as it is in many respects, may be pushed to extremes, there is a proverb in your honour's country about giving a dog a bad name which may be cited in proof; and as Justinian in his Institutes well remarks——"

"Oh, damn Justinian!" cried the Magistrate, who was beginning to fidget and assume an expression of dismay at the high flight to which the speaker had soared. "We have nothing to do with either Cæsar or Justinian here. Keep 'em for Mr Justice Proser and the High Court, and stick to the Penal Code and the plain facts of the case."

"The brute!" muttered Mr Roy to himself,—"the cursed, mulish, ignorant brute! It is casting pearls before swine to waste good pleading on him. Mr Muffington Prig would have appreciated me at once. However, I shall have to humour him in his own way. Well then, your worship," recommenced Mr Roy, "the simplest way will be to put you in possession of the full facts of the case, and you will soon satisfy yourself that Afzul is as innocent of all share in the robberies as you are: and more than that, you will be able to put your hand upon the guilty party. I shall call as my chief witness the honest, zealous, and respectable headman of the village, whose prudent and skilful management of this affair will doubtless meet with your worship's warm approbation."

While Gangooly was shuffling forward with low salaams to the Magistrate, and smiles to those who made way for him, a slight disturbance took place in the crowd behind Mr Eversley, and a female figure, wrapped from head to foot in a thick heavy *chaddar*, forced her way through, and flung herself at the Magistrate's feet, making as if she would embrace his knees.

"Hilloa! what the deuce?" cried the magistrate, starting to his feet and taking his cigar from his mouth. "What does she want? If she has a petition to present, let her bring it when the investigation is over. Here, *burkundaz* (policeman), take her aside."

Before the man could take hold of her, the woman threw back her cloak, and showed the features of Kristo

Baboo's daughter, flushed with agitation, and tear-stained, but lighted up with devotion and self-sacrifice into a beauty that was more captivating than she had ever possessed in the days of her tranquil pride and indifference. The Magistrate saw at a glance that she was no vulgar petitioner come to complain of a neighbour for abuse, or of a policeman for oppression, and waved back the official who had come forward to take her away.

"Asylum of the universe!" she faltered, holding up her joined hands, but not daring to raise her eyes; "I have come to save him. The fault is all mine. By Mother Ganga I swear it. It was to see me that he came by night to our house. Punish me if you will, but let him go."

"What is this, and who are you, my girl?" said Mr Eversley, kindly; "are you the daughter of Kristo Baboo?"

"No daughter of mine," said Kristo, in a firm, stern voice. "The daughters of the house of Lahory have always been *purdah-nishin* (remaining behind the curtain—modest). No street-walking trull calls me father. I am childless among my kinsfolk."

And Kristo set his teeth and folded his arms firmly across his breast, as if he would press down any swelling of the heart towards his child. A murmur of approbation ran through the crowd at Kristo's words, but Radha shuddered, and would have fallen flat on the grass, had not Shamsuddeen Khan, the Subadar, come forward and raised her in his arms.

"She is *my* daughter," he said, fondly putting his arms around her. "She needs not to ask protection from any infidel dog. Blessed be the prophet who selected her from among the infidel to receive the light of his truth."

"Stay, Subadar Sahib!" said the Magistrate, who now began to see how the charge against Afzul was to go; "I must satisfy myself about the disposal of this young lady afterwards. Meanwhile, we shall finish what we have in hand."

"I cannot regret this somewhat melodramatic interruption," said Mr Roy, "for it will have prepared your worship's mind for the explanation which I am about to offer of Afzul Khan's movements about Kristo Baboo's house. The warlike young Muhammadan had gained the heart of the Hindoo maiden. As the deathless Shakespeare says, she loved him for the dangers——"

"Never mind Shakespeare just now, man, but get on with your statement," cried the Magistrate, impatiently.

"Well, sir, the visits of Afzul Khan to Kristo Baboo's can easily be proved to have been occasioned by his passion for this young lady, and you will admit that, under the circumstances, it was not likely that he would have chosen broad daylight for visiting his Dulcinea. The zealous headman of Dhupnagar, Gangooly, soon satisfied himself that Afzul Khan's nocturnal wanderings had nothing to do with the robberies, and accordingly he refused to give any colour to the suspicion against him, though pressed and bullied to do so by his superior, the Deputy Magistrate. Your worship may understand the object which that officer had in criminating my client, when I tell you that he himself has long been a suitor for the girl."

"I am sure, sir," said Preonath, indignantly, "you will give no countenance to such aspersions, which are simply invented upon the spur of the moment in the want of any better argument on behalf of the prisoner."

"You may explain your conduct again; let him go on," said the Magistrate, coolly.

"The assertion can be proved if your worship deems it necessary," said Mr Roy. "Well, then, when he found that Gangooly, the headman, was too honest and incorruptible to aid him in getting up a case against Afzul Khan, the Deputy Magistrate placed the case in the hands of one of his own followers, that glib-tongued gentleman whose evidence we heard a little ago. Your worship will have noted for yourself how completely Mr Jaddoo has justified the Deputy Magistrate's choice. Well, but although Gangooly the headman was thus insulted and set aside, he was too faithful to his trust to relinquish his efforts to find out who the thieves were that had been harassing the village and the ryots round about. But before I go further I must ask your worship's advice. I conceive that my duty to my client is discharged when I show that there is no probability of guilt attaching to him, and I think, from what you have heard, and from the evidence which Kristo Baboo's daughter will give, if called upon, you will be of opinion that there is no case against Afzul Khan to send to the Sessions Judge. It is no part of my duty to place the real culprits in the hands of the law, but if your worship is of opinion that by so doing I shall further advantage my client, I shall next proceed to do so."

"I beg you will go on, sir," said Mr Eversley, in a much more polite tone than he had hitherto employed. "If you can throw any light upon these robberies, I shall be very much obliged to you."

"Very well, we shall see what our friend Gangooly has to say upon the subject. Now, Mr Headman, will you tell us what you know about the thefts?"

"Cherisher of the poor," said Gangooly, "if your slave should presume to represent anything which is not already known to your wisdom, boundless as the depths of ocean, he would crave that his presumption may be forgiven him. My fathers have been headmen of Dhupnagar since——"

"Yes, yes, I know," hastily interrupted the Magistrate; "but back to the robberies."

"Incarnation of Justice!" resumed the headman, "it befell one night about three weeks ago—it was two nights after the festival of Shashti, the protectress of children, and the very night that our cow, Moti, calved—that I was lying asleep by my wife, when I heard a noise in the street, and my name called. Now I, not knowing that it was not an evil spirit which might be desirous to entice me out to devour me, did not answer until it had called a fourth time, for, as your exalted wisdom is well aware, it is not given to the night fiends to call oftener than three times. And so, putting on my clothes and taking the name of Rama in my mouth, I opened the street door, and found there this excellent gentleman, whose knowledge and learning have raised him from a Hindoo to the rank of a Sahib, and he made to me a certain communication. May his prosperity increase!"

"Get on, headman, get on," said the Magistrate, impatiently. "You are as slow as a bullock tugging grain up-hill. Come to the point, man."

"This worthy gentleman then told me what he had overheard at Rutton Pal's spirit shop," continued Gangooly; "and taking the two watchmen with me, we went out, and saw two men, strangers in Dhupnagar, and whose appearance was like that of the persons who broke into the Ryot of Gaogong's house. From what they said, we gathered that they had evil designs against Ramanath the priest, whom the gods have now taken to themselves, this wicked village being unworthy of so good a man. So we watched them crawl into the Temple compound and spy round about the priest's house, but the doors were all locked, and not being able to get in, they came out again. And then, taking our staves in our hands, we tracked them through the bazaar, until they went into the house of a respectable townsman."

"Whose house?" hastily demanded the Magistrate.

"Into the house of the worthy money-lender, Tincowry," replied Gangooly.

"A likely story," cried Three Shells, angrily. "I suppose you will say that I had something to do with them next. Protector of the poor! I pray you listen not to this lying headman, whom the most excellent Deputy Magistrate has had to suspend for his misconduct, and who is well known to the whole village for a blackguard and a broker. My character is as an open book, that all may read."

"As our friend the money-lender may be able to throw some light upon this business, I would suggest to your worship that his presence here should be secured," interposed Mr Roy. "It is very probable that he has no intentions of going away, but it would be well that some steps were taken to provide against his being called off on any important business."

"Certainly," said the Magistrate; "look after him, *nazir*" (sheriff); and a couple of policemen planted themselves beside Three Shells, much to the money-lender's annoyance.

"And so, as this gentleman advised me," continued Gangooly, "I held my peace about the matter, telling only my own wife, and warning her that if she talked of it either at the tank or in the bazaar, I would bend a bamboo on her back. And we watched every night to get more proof against them, but they never showed their face out of doors. At last, Lutchmun, our watchman, came to me yesternight, and said that the thieves were abroad. And so I roused this worthy Englified-Hindoo gentleman, and we set out in the direction of the Temple; but as we approached it we saw a figure flying down the Walesbyganj road, and set after it in chase. We lost it, however, and just as we were saying a prayer in case it might be a ghost who was misleading us, we heard a groan down the road. We ran away a little space, but this excellent English-like gentleman, whose courage is like that of Kartikeya" (Mars) "ran forward and cried out that it was a wounded man. And so we blessed ourselves, and went forward and found that it was one of the thieves who had been struck down by his fellow. And so we secured him until your lordship should arrive."

Here Three Shells cast a despairing glance around him as if he were looking for means of escape, and found every avenue closed up. "Prosunno," he said, in a hoarse whisper, "Prosunno, there is a cursed plot being hatched against me. Should bail be required, be Protap and you prepared to tender it. You shall be well repaid for the service."

"And where is the prisoner?" asked the Magistrate; "bring him forward if he is here."

A palanquin was here carried through the crowd, guarded on both sides by the old watchmen, Hurree and Lutchmun, who almost staggered under the weight of the heavy cudgels which a sense of the important duty intrusted to them had induced them to carry. The door was opened, and the bull's head and face of Tettoo, Panchoo's mate, showed itself from the inside.

"Allow me to introduce to your worship," said Mr Roy, "one of the gentlemen who has obligingly made Dhupnagar the scene of his exploits. Step out, Tettoo, and salaam to the Magistrate Sahib. Tettoo very naturally feels aggrieved at his comrade's perfidy, who, instead of, like an honest thief, sharing with him the booty which they had stolen, gave him that slash here, and walked off with the whole himself. I believe that if any hopes were held out to him that he might profit by the information, he would be disposed to favour us with a full confession. What say you, Tettoo? Will you tell all to the Magistrate Sahib?"

"I never had any head," said Tettoo, looking stupidly round about him. "Panchoo always said so, and now that he has stabbed me, and run away, I am just like a young kid that has lost itself in the jungle. But it was very unfair of Panchoo to do so; I would never have acted in the same way to him."

"The best thing I can do is to remand him for a day or two, until I see if any more information is forthcoming," said Mr Eversley. "Now that we have got this clue, we shall soon get at the bottom of the business. Send out a party of your policemen early to-morrow morning to track the fellow who has bolted. In the meantime, keep the prisoner and the money-lender safe, and bring them up before me at

Bhutpore the day after to-morrow. As for your client, sir, there is nothing against him, and not the slightest imputation attaches to him. Subadar Sahib, I congratulate you on the innocence of your son, and am grieved for the annoyance you have got about it."

"If my client will be advised by me," said Mr Roy, "he will prosecute the witnesses who have perjured themselves before your worship. They were evidently mere tools in the hands of the Deputy Magistrate, who, I hope, will not be allowed to go unpunished for the pains which he has taken in concocting this case against a rival."

"Trouble not yourself about him," said Afzul Khan, haughtily. "I can spurn with my foot any cur who snaps at my heels."

"Take care, 'ware violence," said the Magistrate. "I shall have to bind you over to keep the peace if you talk so. I heartily wish, however, he would give the fellow a good sound kicking; he wants it badly," he added, below his breath.

"And now I must see about that girl. Stand forward, young lady. If you take my advice you will go back to your father's house, and not be so ready to get young fellows into trouble by encouraging them about your windows at hours when they should be in their own beds. Here is your daughter, Baboo. A pretty girl like her will not long sigh for a husband. Will you take her home with you, and let what is past be forgotten?"

"Never!" said Kristo, with an angry scowl. "She is no daughter of mine after this. She may kennel in the bazaar for aught I care. The Lahories may not have been better than their neighbours, but there was never one of the strain who disgraced us in this fashion before. Go to your paramour, wanton, with my curse and the curse of the holy——"

"Oh, father!" cried the girl, throwing herself at his feet, and raising her hands, "curse me not. I am your daughter—your silken-haired one—your Radha, as you used to call me."

"Back, forehead-burned one!" cried the Baboo, starting away from her; "break not my caste with the touch of your polluting hands."

"I tell you no," he roared to the Dipty, who, holding by his arm, was endeavouring in vain to persuade him to take back his daughter. "If you want her thus much, there she is. Take her you, or any one else who chooses, but do not ask me to be your pandar. I call ye all, friends, to witness that Kristo Doss Lahory is a childless man."

"Come away, daughter," said the Subadar, stepping forward and tenderly raising the sobbing girl. "Heed not his revilings; henceforth I am your father. The will of Allah has rescued you from the abominations of heathendom, and placed you under the light of the only true faith. 'Hell hath He made for those misguided fools, and Heaven for us that are true believers. Reclining upon the couches of the blessed, ye shall see him who reviled you writhing in the torments of the damned.' Ameen."

"Nay, but," faltered the weeping Radha, "he is my father, and I love him dearly. Who else will care for a cast-off one like me?"

"I will, Radha," whispered Afzul in her ear; and the maiden blushed, and clung still more firmly to the Subadar's arm.

"I see no reason, Subadar Sahib," said the Magistrate, "if the girl is willing to go with you, why you should not take her. Her own father chooses to cast her off, and there is no one else who has any claims upon her. But she is a high-caste girl. I hope your son will marry her honourably."

"She shall be married the first propitious day after she puts off her idolatrous belief and repeats the creed of Islam. Her name shall be Kadijah, and may her husband prove as faithful and loving a husband to her as the Prophet—may the fulfilment of the blessing be upon him!—was to her who first bore that name."

"It is enough," said the Magistrate; "and you, Baboo, ought to be thankful that your daughter has fallen into such good hands, seeing that you have cast her away yourself."

"The justice of the Sahibs, indeed!" muttered Kristo, as, calling his servants together, he strode away to his own house. "They have taken my land, and now they have got my daughter. Oh for a second Parasu Rama, to clean the country of the unclean brood, whether Christian or Mussulman!"

"If you, sir," continued the Magistrate, "will follow up the inquiries which you have already undertaken on behalf of your client, on the part of the Crown, I shall see that your services are suitably acknowledged. Take care of the prisoner and the money-lender, head-man, and bring them safe to Bhutpore to-morrow."

"*Avatara* of Justice," cried Three Shells, "you do not mean that I am to be kept in custody!"

"I mean something devilish like it, though," said the Magistrate, who was now on his feet and tightening his waistband, while his horse was being got ready. "I have had my eye upon you for some time, my man. I know the game that you have been playing with that foolish young Rajah of Ghatghar and some other of the landholders, and I always thought it likely that some day I should have to spoil it for you."

"But, cherisher of the poor! I am innocent. I am a victim to the lies of my debtors, who think to get quit of their obligations by bringing false charges against me. I can prove my innocence by a score of witnesses."

"All the better for yourself," said the Magistrate; "but meanwhile I must keep my hand upon you. I shall take two bails of ten thousand rupees each, and your own for other as much for to-night, if you wish it; and after to-morrow it will depend entirely upon the evidence whether I can take bail or not. The

Deputy Magistrate will arrange that; and you, sir, will perhaps assist."

"Ay, ay," said Mr Roy; "as I have begun the case I'll carry it to an end. *Finis coronat opus,* as the Latin poet says; or rather it will be *funus coronat opus* in this case, I suspect. Excuse the pun, sir, but if you knew the restraint that I have had to put on my propensity for the *paronomasia* during the last two hours, you would forgive me. Good-night to your worship."

"Your conduct, sir, with regard to the prosecution of the charge against Afzul Khan must be a matter for subsequent explanation," said Mr Eversley to the Dipty, in a low voice, as the latter attended him to his horse. "Good-night, my good Gangooly, and take care of these prisoners of yours. Your conduct has been worthy of all your fathers who have been headmen of Dhupnagar since the flood."

"My lord, my lord," cried Gangooly, almost beside himself with joy, "may your prosperity be doubled; and may——" but the headman's benediction was lost as the Magistrate clattered up through the bazaar, and disappeared in the gathering darkness on the Bhutpore road.

"You heard, Dwarkanath; you heard, Shama Churn; you heard, son Gopal, what the Magistrate Sahib said?" cried Gangooly, in ecstasies. "Verily the praise of the good is sweet to the heart as dew to the young rice leaf before the early rain clouds come; and now we must do the Sahib's bidding."

The restraint which the Magistrate's presence had imposed was no sooner removed than the crowd set to work to discuss the marvellous turn which affairs had taken. Those who had been towards the outside of the crowd had heard nothing; and most of those who had been nearest understood but little of what had been going on; and between the two the explanations which were offered were incoherent in the extreme. Of this, however, all were certain, that the Magistrate had given Kristo's daughter to the Mussulmans, and that Three Shells had been made a prisoner in connection with the robberies; and all agreed, as they went to their several homes, that such wonders had never before been heard of in the valley of the Gungaputra.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE FLIGHT OF THREE SHELLS.

It is not every one who has been shipwrecked, but even those who have not included that calamity within their range of experience, will easily imagine the feelings with which a man who has struggled for life with the black waves and has with difficulty been dragged to the shore, wakes the next morning full of thankfulness that however great may have been his misfortunes, and whatever losses he has sustained, he has still life to which to cling. So was it with Krishna as, on the morning after the day that had been marked by so many events in the history of Dhupnagar, he stood with Chakwi by his side in the embrasure of a window which looked out upon the compound and the Temple of the Linga, now standing, with door open and deserted by worshippers. Both were clad in the mourning which orthodox Hindooism prescribes for those who have lost a near relative. Krishna had not combed his hair, and his *chaddar* was twisted round his body in rope-like fashion; while Chakwi's robe was of the plainest cotton without an embroidered border, and she had laid aside her necklace, ear-rings, and bracelets. But the sunken eyes and sallow face of the head of the family showed that there was no need for any formal expression of sorrow, for that the memory of the good priest was affectionately embalmed in the sorrowing hearts of his children.

Ramanath's wife, the Thakoorani, raised the loudest lamentation over the priest's death, and her grief was perhaps the soonest ended. She was much concerned whether the full penalties of Hindoo widowhood were to be imposed upon her, and mourned pathetically over the harshness of the rule which allowed the widow only one full meal in the four-and-twenty hours, and forbade her to wear ornaments. The Thakoorani was still young and plump, and liked to show herself off, if only to the village wives who visited her, in silks and jewellery. She was not a little comforted, however, when Krishna told her that she might wear what she pleased and eat whatever she desired, and she thought within herself that there was a good deal to be said for a heresy that took such a sensible view of a widow's lot; and though she loudly vowed that silk should never again go on her back or gold on her neck, she laid her dresses and ornaments carefully aside in the hope that some day she might put them on again without being reproached with wantonness by her family.

Chakwi, who had heard from her nurse Dossee the results of Mr Eversley's investigations regarding the robberies, was telling her husband what had occurred, and how the Magistrate had given Radha to the Mussulmans. "Poor child," she said, looking up into her husband's face with ill-concealed curiosity as to the effect which the mention of his old love would produce upon him, "you must forgive her now since this calamity has come upon her."

"Forgive her! I have nothing to forgive," said Krishna, with perhaps the least accent of bitterness in his tones. "I shall be ever grateful to her for teaching me by contrast the worth of a true woman. Had she not fooled me as she did, I might never have discovered the value of my own dear little wife, who is worth as many Radhas as there are trees in the Panch Pahar forests over there."

"But she is so fair," said Chakwi, artful enough to know that the mention of the name of her former rival was the readiest way to extort from him a compliment to herself; "and she will be so unhappy now. Only think how sad her lot must be to be cast among people who kill cows and eat all unclean and loathsome meats. They may even force her to feed on beef."

"And not bad food," said Krishna with a smile; "and we ourselves might be very thankful if we had never to put up with worse, for we shall be very poor, Chakwi, and I shall have to teach in Calcutta to maintain us and the Thakoorani, or become a clerk in some merchant's office."

"But our lands—but this house and the properties in Bhutpore and in Gapshapganj," said Chakwi, opening her eyes wide with astonishment; "who will deprive you of them? They are all yours."

"No, Chakwi; they belong to that accursed idol yonder, and the law will give them all to its service. My poor father, too, who thought he owed a duty to the village and the people in the matter, wrote down a will, when he was irritated at me for abjuring idolatry, and directed that all the property and the Temple house and lands should be given to the Linga, to which he thought they properly belonged. I wish they were all at the bottom of the Gungaputra."

"Hush, hush!" said Chakwi, shuddering; "Siva, the destroyer, has punished us already enough; provoke him not further by your impiety."

"Silly one," said Krishna, putting his arm round her; "what harm can befall us for ridiculing a rotten old stone? If I had my will, I would break it in a thousand atoms. No, then, I would not," added he, noticing Chakwi's scared and piteous look, "for my dear father had some care for it; nor would I do anything to hurt the feelings of the townsfolk. But still it is hard, Chakwi, that we should be turned out of house and home for such a cause. We might have been so comfortable and happy here."

"And why can we not be so still?" said Chakwi, hesitatingly. "Who could be a better priest to the Linga than you yourself. Does not everybody say that there is no one in the valley, not even the Dipty Baboo, who is so learned; and our father, I am sure, did not know half so much as you do. I am sure the villagers would be glad if you became priest, and we might live here so happily. Remember it was for this that our father designed you."

"Don't tempt me, dear one," said Krishna, turning away, "for I have had a bitter struggle to get the better of the selfish suggestions which my own heart is making to me. But, with the help of God, I never will degrade myself by becoming the minister of a superstition I despise. And yet the temptations of home and worldly wealth are strong, and often like to get the better of my strength. But I'll keep them under—I'll keep them under; the pedants and self-seekers in Calcutta, who ridiculed me once and taunted me with making peace with superstition for interested motives, shall see that I am capable of making a greater sacrifice than any of them."

"Yes, Chakwi," he continued, looking down upon the girl, whose face endeavoured to resist the cloud of disappointment that threatened to settle on it, "we shall have to give all up and seek a living in some other part of the country. You will stay here until I can find employment and a house for you and my mother somewhere, and then we shall let the Temple have all that it has any claim upon. Do not cry, dearest, for when I have made money enough, we shall come back some day and buy a house in the village, for there is no place on earth so sweet as the valley of the Gungaputra."

Soon after Krishna went out to seek Gangooly the headman, and to ask that the sealed packet which his father had confided to the charge of that official might now be opened and its contents made public. On arriving at Gangooly's door, however, he found an excited crowd standing about, in the midst of which was the headman himself in a towering passion, shouting at the top of his voice and gesticulating wildly with his arms as he endeavoured to issue half-a-dozen different orders at once to those who stood round about him.

From Dwarkanath, the schoolmaster, who had sent his pupils to play at the first sound of the uproar, Krishna learned that the cause of the tumult was the escape of Three Shells, who, when the headman went to convey him to the Magistrate at Bhutpore, was not to be found at his house, and had evidently hastily gathered a few valuables together and fled overnight from the village.

It was even so. Late on the previous evening Prosunno, the lawyer, and Protap, the accountant, had been induced, with considerable difficulty, to sign the bail-bond for the release of the money-lender. Both did so with many misgivings, and but for the fact that Three Shells knew enough concerning themselves to bring them within the reach of the law, they would have refused him all assistance. It was late in the evening when the mahajan was allowed to leave the headman's house, and he noticed that the people looked strangely at him and did not salaam as they were wont to. But he minded them not, and walked slowly towards his own house, apparently as collected as if nothing were the matter. It was only when he got inside and had bolted the room door that he ventured to give relief to his feelings. He was strangely calm and collected for a man who stood upon the brink of so dangerous a precipice, the height of which no one knew so well as he did himself; but he felt that his only chance was to keep cool, and calculate every step that he took if he would save himself from the gallows. He went first to the cupboard and poured out a stiff glass of brandy, and watched to note if his hand trembled as he raised it to his lips.

"I will do," he said to himself, as he drained the liquor off. "I feel firm enough for anything; and now a few minutes to make my plans, and then for the road."

He sat down in a corner and shaded his eyes with his hands, while he looked fixedly before him as if he were seeing what the future had in store for him.

"And this is the end of all my fine dreams of power and wealth, of wide estates and a fair wife. The gods have been making a fool of me: curse them, I will ask no more help at their hands; and yet I need not make enemies of them until I get my feet once more on firm ground. Everything went so smooth with me; the very plantain bough seemed to bend to my hand if I wanted to pluck the fruit. I felt as safe this morning as if I were set upon a mountain, and where am I now? Could it have been the murder of Ramanath that has raised the wrath of the gods against me? I put forth no hand upon him. The guilt lies with Panchoo and Tettoo—may they both swing for it! I daresay they would have done it though I had never mentioned the matter, and my only safety seemed to rest in his death, instead of which it has been the beginning of ruin. And that paper which, with so much trouble and scheming, I got from Gangooly and destroyed had no connection with my guilt. I have no doubt Ramanath has given the other to the magistrate, and when it is opened my doom is fixed. I might face this robbery business, and by spending a good deal of money purchase enough of witnesses to rid my feet; but that murder might come out any time, and then I am gone. Ah, it must be a horrible thing to be hanged! Every time I hear mention of it there is a fainting lightness at my breast, and I seem to be feeling in vain for the firm earth with my feet; and I have dreamt too, ever since I did *that*, of being led out to die in the dim morning light, and feeling the hangman's hands upon my throat, have wakened half suffocated. O gods! keep me from such a fate, and all the evil that I have done shall be well repaid to thee. When I am once more in safety and have had time to gather money about me, you will not find a more liberal or devout worshipper than I shall prove. Consider, O holy mother Kalee, what you will lose should aught evil happen to me."

"I must make haste and begone from this," he said, starting up. "I shall leave much behind me that will be utterly lost, but I must sacrifice everything for my life. These jewels, however, will give me a fresh start in some other part of the country. There is at least a lakh of rupees' worth of precious stones here, and, unlike papers, they tell no tales of one."

He took as he spoke a leather belt stuffed with jewels and unset precious stones, and bound it tightly round his waist. He next seized a mass of papers, and holding them to the lamp reduced them to ashes in an instant.

"These will let out no secrets now," he said, as he ground the burnt ashes to powder with his shoe. "Then there are those bonds in the iron box; shall I burn them? no, there is nothing dangerous in them, and he who finds them may have them for his trouble, and bad luck may they bring to him."

"These are the Ghatghar titles," he continued, taking up a thick bundle of mouldy parchment. "I cannot, no, I cannot leave these. The happiest hours of my life were spent holding them in my hand, and dreaming of how great I would be when the Ghatghar lands were mine, and how all the country would be at my feet, and Radha by my side. My curse upon that Magistrate and his English-speaking Hindoo for upsetting my plans," he added, his tigerish disposition for an instant getting the better of his forced calmness. "I feel as if I could almost mount the gallows with a good heart if I could cut both their throats."

His preparations were speedily made; and as soon as he had taken all the money and valuables that he could easily carry about his person, and wrapped a thick cloak about his head and shoulders, he stood ready to go.

"I shall leave everything just as it stands, and let the dogs of villagers do their will. I have taken everything that would betray me—everything that would make known all my guilt. Stay, I shall want weapons, for who knows what I may have to face before I get through the jungles and catch the railway somewhere beyond the Sonthal country. I must not go near any station within a hundred miles of this place."

He extinguished the lamp, and walked out quietly at the street door, stood for a moment at the corner of the lane, where it enters the bazaar, assured himself that all Dhupnagar was sleeping soundly after the excitement, shuffled cautiously along until he had passed the village green and the temple, and then set out with long strides down the road towards the Gungaputra. A jackal picking some carrion by the wayside started at his approach and crossed the road before him, breaking out into a mournful howl, which rose clear and shrill upon the night air, like the cry of a child in pain. Three Shells paused, and felt a cold shudder run through him, but it was only for a moment. "Kalee protect me!" he muttered, "but this is awful. It is flying in the face of the gods to proceed after that warning; but I must on, for no omen is so terrible as that black gallows which stands behind me."

Accordingly next morning when Gangooly, attended by his two lieutenants, Hurree and Lutchmun, went to Three Shells' house to request him to accompany them to Bhutpore, the usurer was nowhere to be found. Before Gangooly's arrival Gopi, the misshapen clerk, had searched the whole house for his master, pocketing all valuables that he could lay his hands on; and he now declared, from the appearance of things, that Three Shells had fled. Then commenced a tumult. Gangooly, imprecating in his loudest tones the vengeance of all the gods upon the head of the fugitive, despatched his men for Mr Roy and the Dipty, and calling some of the bystanders, ordered them to send for Prosunno the lawyer, and Protap the accountant, who had been the mahajan's bails. In a few minutes the news of Three Shells' flight had spread through the village, and all the idlers in the bazaar had gathered round the headman.

"He is gone, and left-handed luck go with him," said Gangooly; "and if it were not for what the Magistrate Sahib will say, I would think that we were well rid of a bad neighbour. However, we must raise the village and give chase, if it is only to please the Magistrate. Aha, my friends," he added, as Protap and

Prosunno made their appearance together, with looks of consternation upon their faces. "You were always worrying the neighbours to gain Three Shells' good graces, and now he has paid you for it. Your friend has taken to his heels, and you will have to pay ten thousand rupees a-piece for him."

"It is impossible!" faltered Prosunno; "he cannot have fled. He could not take his money with him, and he would never have left it behind. He will turn up."

"The better for you, then," said Gangooly; "but it will be if he cannot help it. I suspect he is beyond the passes of Panch Pahar by this time."

"Then I am ruined!" said Protap, with a groan; "for I could not raise ten thousand rupees though I sold everything that belongs to me, down to my wife's nose-ring. For the gods' sake, Mr Headman, every one knows how the Magistrate Sahib honours you, tell him that I am a poor man, and get me let off the penalty."

"I shall think of the matter," said Gangooly, with a lordly air; "but remember, Protap, I have seen you sell a poor ryot's cooking-pots to pay Three Shells' interest; and it is no more than your deserts though you get a rub of the same salve yourself. And now, friends, gather at my house and I shall give you instructions for the search."

"You're a good boy, Gopi," said Gangooly, turning to the usurer's misshapen clerk, "and you will no doubt have saved as much as will be bread to you until you get another master. You will keep the house until we get the Magistrate's instructions what is to be done with the things. There is, doubtless, a lot of papers, bonds, and such-like, which will be but little use to any one now that Three Shells has run away and left them. It would not be much harm though you put fire to them, Gopi; they would only give bother afterwards. Any little trinkets or trifles that would not be missed and might be of use to yourself, you might take for wages, and you may keep any bonds that have been granted by Gapshapganj or Bhutpore folk; but burn every scrap of paper that would make a Dhupnagar man liable for an anna, for heaven forbid that we should not act neighbour-like when we have it in our power. And keep your own counsel, Gopi."

"There are one or two bonds of mine among them," said Gangooly to himself, "which would be well out of the way; for if even Three Shells turn up again, he will find something else to do than to collect his debts."

Parties were accordingly despatched to search for the usurer in all the directions about Dhupnagar where it was supposed that he could have concealed himself, and Gangooly himself, accompanied by the dejected Prosunno and Protap, set out for Bhutpore to communicate the intelligence to the Magistrate.

As a band of villagers, under the command of Gopal, the son of Gangooly, went down the road past Walesbyganj to search the Panch Pahar jungle, they found Afzul Khan and Agha standing before the Subadar's gate watching the sleeky coat of Sultan being combed down after his morning's exercise. On their asking what was ado that so many of the villagers were astir, Gopal told them the news.

"By Allah! but I should like to join the hunt," said Afzul. "I have not forgotten how the old rogue annoyed me when I was in his clutches as a debtor. If it were not that the Subadar has promised to let me see Radha after breakfast, I would set out with them."

"You will see enough of her afterwards," said Agha, drily; "let us go by all means. It will be prime sport hunting down this *kaffir;* and if I come up with him I shall slay him. Allah has been very good to us, and it is only right that we should make some return."

"Let the *syces* get our horses, then," cried Afzul, "and I shall get my rifle and a pig-spear. I would give a gold mohur to drive it into the rascal's lean carcass."

Agha smiled grimly, and went away to order their horses for the chase.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE TIGER'S NULLAH.

It is hot work scrambling at sultry noontide up the rugged ridges of Panch Pahar. You form but little idea of the real character of the Panch Pahar hills as you look at them from the Dhupnagar side of the valley, say from the Pagoda Tope, whence your eye can traverse the whole length of the range from the lofty heights that it raises over the town of Bhutpore, down to the bow-like slopes by which it descends to the level of the plains. Clothed as they are in thick forest, the outlines of the hill seem to be composed of undulating acclivities, all the angularities and roughness of its surface being concealed by the sweep of its green drapery. Looking over from this point, you would say that the Panch Pahar woods were a grove where lovers might make assignations, or where a truant Apsara from Indra's heaven would delight to gather a garland for her hair. When the sun was high in the sky, and the grass was drooping, and the earth putting on a red baked aspect under the hot rays, it was pleasant to look away from the fierce glare and find relief for the gaze in the deep dark-green glades of Panch Pahar, the sight of which almost seemed to cool and refresh the wayfarer, as, wearied with the ascent from Gapshapganj, he paused for a minute on the ridge by the Pagoda Tope, and looked across before him to the other side of the valley.

But inside the forest itself, a very different impression is received. Gentle slopes when we look under the green veil resolve themselves into rough precipices faced with rocks of dark-brown laterite, between which grow the thorny jungle briars and the sharp spear grass. The forest itself is made up of thick bamboo trees springing up among still thicker underwood, with clumps of tall timber springing up in every spot where a rich soil was to be found. The *mowah*, the wild mango, and the *koosoom,* or leafless sycamore, had rooted themselves in every level hollow where the water pouring over the rocks and baring the surface above, had prepared a bed for their reception. High up on the heights, a thick forest of *sal* and teak crowned the shoulders and crest of the ridge, and with the thick brushwood growing under it, presented an almost impenetrable barrier to the traveller or the huntsman.

There is a bullock path from the Gungaputra valley through a gorge between the two most northerly peaks of Panch Pahar, and by this route pilgrims from up-country generally travel when they visit the Linga of Dhupnagar, or the Temple of Jaganatha at Pooree. But as the pass is watched by a small *thana* (police-station), it will easily be conceived that persons who have an interest in keeping the authorities unacquainted with their movements will prefer any other route to this one. This at all events was the view Three Shells took, when, a little after midnight, the money-lender succeeded in crossing the Gungaputra at the Ghatghar ford, wading so long as he kept his feet, swimming through the deep parts, and scrambling up the Panch Pahar bank, cold and dispirited, and nearly half-drowned. He felt that it would be rushing into the jaws of justice to take the public road across the hills. His acquaintance with the robbers who had at times harboured about the range had informed him of other routes, and if he could but find one of these, he would run comparatively little risk of being captured. But the dark gloomy forest moaning in the night wind, and at times re-echoing the wailing of the jackal or the more dreadful cry of some beast of prey, made him pause at the outskirts, and look round about him with a cold shudder for some other way of escape. But behind him was the dark stream, flowing steadily on with a sullen, pitiless murmur, and in his terror he could almost see the outlines of the gallows waving impatiently for him on the other side.

"It is my only chance," said he, endeavouring to pluck up his courage; "once inside the forest, and all the men in Dhupnagar would not capture me, unless by accident. I have heard Panchoo Bhur, the robber, tell how he has lain within arm's length of Eversley Sahib's policemen, and heard them laying their plots for his capture, while no one knew that he was within a few yards of them. Yes, I must take to the jungle, but I shall wait until morning before I go far into it, and then there will be no danger."

He walked round the outskirts of the jungle until he fell upon a path, by which, perhaps, the ryots of Ghatghar were wont to enter the forest in search of firewood, and following it he soon found himself at the foot of the hill where the ascent began. He paused and looked back, but all was still behind him, and no sounds met his ear but the murmur of the river, and the blast of the wind among the trees on the heights above him.

He turned aside until he came to a broad stone under a tamarind tree; and after he had peered cautiously into the surrounding jungle, and stirred up the grass with a stick, lest any snake might be lurking about, he sat down and leant his head on both his hands, endeavouring to arrange his plans. But the excitement and the fatigue were beginning to tell upon him, and he several times started up to dispel the drowsiness that was weighing him down. His head, however, grew more heavy to hold up, and in spite of all his efforts to keep awake, he fell fast asleep, his head resting against the stone.

The confused and shapeless visions which at first began to chase each other through his mind, whirling about in Walpurgis waltz fashion, after a time began to assume a definite appearance. He was back again in his house at Dhupnagar, and was busy counting out his money. Piles of gold *mohors* lay on the table before him; and a heap of mortgages and bonds filled his strong-box, so that the strength of two men would not suffice to close the lid. Presently in came Kristo Baboo saying that he had nothing left to pledge, but that he would sell his daughter Radha for half-a-lakh of rupees. "Take, take, Baboo," Three Shells imagined himself saying—"take all that thou seest there, and give me the damsel to be my honoured wife." But before he could take Kristo Baboo's hand, Ramanath, the priest, accompanied by another priest, whose bosom was all bloody, thrust himself between, and held out the identical golden vase which Three Shells had dedicated to the Linga, full of poison, and ordered him to drink. "Drink," said the priest, clutching him by the back of the head—"drink;" and Three Shells already found the goblet thrust against his lips, and with set teeth was trying hard to keep the poison out of his mouth, when the other priest drew a dagger out of his breast and held it high up in the air, and was about to strike it with all his force between Three Shells' shoulders, when, with a wild cry of terror, the mahajan sprang to his feet and awoke.

Time, too, to awake. The sun was now rising above the ridges on the other side of the valley, and the tree tops were filled with the rich golden light of morning. Three Shells felt lightened in heart, now that the darkness, with its ominous dreams and unseen terrors, had passed away; and he briskly clambered up a knoll, which lay, boulder-like, apart from the foot of the hill, and looked about him. The uplands were all gilded by the morning rays, but down in the bottom of the valley the light grey mists still hung in fleecy-like veils over the black river and its green banks. Hard over against him was the Ghatghar palace, with its white walls, and terraced roofs, and green painted verandahs, about which the servants were already beginning to bestir themselves. A feeling of savage bitterness came over the mahajan's heart as he thought that, but for the untoward course which affairs had taken, a few weeks might have seen him master there, and lord of all the fair lands that clothed the slopes of the valley beyond. Putting his hand into his waistcloth, he grasped the Ghatghar titles, to assure himself that they were safe, and shook his fist savagely at the palace.

"Not lost to me; no, no,—not lost to me," he muttered, clutching the parchment. "While I hold this, I am still the real owner of Ghatghar, and I shall as soon part with my life as with it. Who knows what may come round? I may die at Ghatghar yet, and a thousand Brahmins be feasted at my *shraad*" (obsequies). "That beggarly Rajah, without these papers, is but my tenant-at-will, and I may yet turn him out of doors. The road is difficult and beset with dangers, but I may accomplish the journey, even as I shall get over this hill, rough though it be to-day."

The forest glades were cool, and Three Shells walked briskly in the shade, so long as the sun was still low in the heavens. The grass was laden with dew, now drying up in the heat; and the mountain streams, which he drank from, were cold and refreshing. His path soon plunged into the depths of the jungle, where all landmarks were lost, and where the sun was scarcely seen through the thick canopy of leaves and branches that intervened. Now and then a band of monkeys would look impudently upon the traveller, and then break away, crashing over the tree tops: and the squirrels would hop up the boughs at his approach, and the green lizard raise itself curiously from the grass, and cease its tick-ticking for a few minutes at the sight of a human being.

Presently the road grew more and more narrow, and the ascent steeper and more toilsome; and the jungle became so thick that Three Shells paused every now and then to assure himself that he had not lost the track. At length he found himself in the centre of a thicket of young bamboo reeds, some feet taller than his head, interspersed with tall jungle grass and fern, and the white bells of the poisonous *dhatura*. With difficulty he forced his way through, in spite of pricks and jags from thorns and the sharp points of twigs, and came out on the side of a ravine, bristling with rough weather-beaten rocks, and with tall trees skirting both sides as far as the eye could follow it up the hill. It was evident to Three Shells that he need not hope to get across the hills by this road; and he resolved to retrace his steps, and follow some one of the other tracks that he had noticed in his morning walk. But in the jungles of Panch Pahar it is much more easy for a traveller to lose his road than to find it again; and Three Shells had lived long enough in the valley of the Gungaputra to have heard of many travellers who had lost their way there, and had never been heard of again, until some hunter had found their bones months after they were missed.

But the day was still young, and Three Shells had good heart. He beat a path for himself through the long grass and the bamboo clumps, keeping the sun upon his right hand, and ever striving to hold his course up the hill. The ascent was getting still steeper, and the fierce heat betokened that noonday was at hand. The money-lender had tasted no food that day, and he soon began to feel faint and thirsty. Just as the sun was at the highest point in the firmament he reached a small well, under the shadow of an arching rock, the green creepers that covered the face of which threw down a fringy curtain to screen the wayfarer from the heat.

"But for this cursed mistake," growled Three Shells, after he had taken a long draught of water from the spring, and had filled his mouth with a handful of the sweet leaves, "I should have been over the hill and well down the other side. I would give a kid to Kalee that I could strike upon the right track. Another night in this forest would be dangerous, for they will have all the outlets surrounded by to-morrow; besides there are tigers about here, who would soon scent the presence of prey. A few minutes more rest, and then I must push on again."

While he sat a kite came down with a swoop, and made a dart into the long grass on the other side of the well, but spying Three Shells instantly took wing again and hovered about above the spot.

"Does the foul bird think it is to feed upon me?" he said, with a shudder; "but I will baulk it. I shall get out of this forest as soon as possible, for this is the second evil omen that I have met with since I started. Perhaps it may have some carrion among the grass there—I shall look."

He put the tall reeds aside and looked through them, stretching forward his long neck; but one glance was enough, and he drew back with a shudder. A mangled corpse, the bones of which had been partly picked by wild beasts, and were still in some places covered with loathsome blue and red fragments of flesh, dotted with myriads of black flies, and emitting a disgusting stench, lay in the thicket; and hard by its side, bright and shining—a strange contrast to the filthy clod of human clay beside it—was the golden vase of the Linga—the famed present of Three Shells to the shrine of Dhupnagar.

"Sacred Siva!" he ejaculated, drawing a long breath; "it is Panchoo. He must have perished in the jungle, or have been slain by a tiger—as I shall be, doubtless, if I stay longer in this accursed spot," he added, while a wild fear flashed across his mind, and he looked anxiously about him as if he meditated instant flight. "And the vase with him too," he muttered; "shall I leave it to be lost for ever in the jungle? nay, for then what good shall the gods get of it. I will take it with me, and then they will have a direct interest in leading me safely through, in order that I may restore it to their service."

With averted eyes and shuddering all the while, the usurer put aside the long spear-grass, and, scarcely daring to let himself see the ghastly remains beside it, clutched the vase and then ran some yards away from the spot before he dared to pause and look at it.

"Ah ha," said he, passing his hand fondly over the graven gold, "the bright one, the shining one; brought back again by the goodness of the gods to its rightful owner; my luck then has not altogether left me, and this vase will pleasure the gods and give me a good footing for piety somewhere else. And that is Panchoo: well it is better perhaps that he is out of the way with so little trouble—folks like him give no trouble. And now I must try the ascent again, for the sun has already taken the downhill path."

Three Shells again set out, with his spirits considerably elevated by finding the vase, which he tied into the corner of his *chaddar*. He pushed through the thick brushwood, heedless that it was tearing both his clothes and his skin. Sometimes he scrambled up a rock to look about him in the hope that he might be able to gather some idea of where he was, but only to come down again, disheartened by the absence of any known landmark by which he could guide his steps. When he got a clear pathway in the forest he would run for a short space, but only to find himself again environed by trackless jungle. He was every hour getting more faint and weary; the afternoon sun was beating upon him with merciless fury wherever its rays could penetrate through the branches; the pains of hunger and thirst were both beginning to tell upon him; and his heart was sinking at the thought of having to pass another night in the forest, without food, and exposed to danger from wild beasts.

After toiling for some hours, he fell upon a track, and with a cry of joy set out, wearied as he was, following its course with long strides. Up it went, winding out and in the face of the hill, now diving under the cover of heavy forest, now coming boldly out upon a bare brow, whence he could see the broad river and its green banks sloping up from each side far away beneath him. The road was strewed with hard, flinty stones, which cut his shoes and hurt his feet. He stumbled over the stumps of trees, and tripped himself upon exposed roots, but still he pressed on, in spite of all his difficulties. He began to feel more and more every moment that it was a race for life that he was running, and he urged his steps onward with increasing desperation as he noticed that the sun was sinking down upon the hill, and that the shadows were lengthening out towards the eastward. He heard a couple of bears roaring in the jungle to the left of him, but his other terrors so goaded him on that he scarcely noted the significance of the noise. More strait and more stony grew the road, until Three Shells was obliged to crawl up it on his hands and his knees. At length, panting and breathless, sweating at every pore, with cut knees and bloody hands, cursing his calamities and praying to the gods each in his turn, the money-lender reached a spot where the broad shoulders of a huge rock had arrested the downward tendency of the soil, and formed a small green level. Here he lay with aching limbs, and lungs that were like to burst within his chest, calculating from the declining sun how much time still remained for him to make his way across the hill.

"May all the fiends in all the hells strangle that meddling headman, and still more meddling lawyer," he groaned. "Who could have thought even this time yesterday that I would be driven thus to take to the jungle like a wild beast? I would almost give the Ghatghar titles to any one who would avenge me on these two. But my day may come yet. Three Shells was never the man to be struck down by a straw."

"What is that?" cried he, raising himself on his elbow and listening attentively, as the clear ping-pang of a rifle was heard down below, and taken up by the forest dells in a thousand echoes. "A gun-shot? It cannot be that they are on my track. They could never have dreamed that I had taken this road. No, no; it must be a stray hunter. But I will make safety sure, and put the crest of the hill between me and him."

Slowly he drew himself up, all sore and aching, and looked round in search of his way. But there was only one track leading to the place where he stood, that by which he had struggled up with so much difficulty, and it ended here abruptly. He was then again lost in the forest—lost, and the avenger of blood perhaps hard on his heels. He went round about the little green platform, pushing aside the grass with his hands, and bending down to seek, but in vain, for the continuance of the path. And when at last no hope remained, he tossed his hands in the air with a wild cry of despair, and with a blasphemous imprecation upon the gods, plunged forward into the jungle.

In the recesses of a deep ravine, by a shallow pool of water, were seated Afzul and Agha. Huge black rocks, whose surfaces were polished by rain and floods to a marble smoothness, and variegated with frequent spangles of talc, which in the afternoon sun glistened like veins of virgin silver, hung over them on both sides. Before them was a precipitous cliff some thirty or forty feet high, the top of which seemed to have been broken off, and to have receded for a space, leaving a ledge two or three feet up, covered with the tall *sabah* grass of which the boatmen of the Gungaputra made their ropes and nets. In the rains a powerful torrent dashes down the ravine, clearing the tall rocks above Afzul and Agha at one bound; but now there was only a small stream trickling down the face of the precipice, and scarcely sufficing to keep the water in the pools from growing stagnant. Even at noon it was cool and shady in the bottom of the ravine, where the two Muhammadans were seated; and the change was grateful and refreshing to them, wearied as they were with toiling up the heights under the fierce heat and glare. Afzul had thrown himself back at full length, his hands below his head; and Agha was still dipping his palms, hollowed in cup fashion, into the pool, and sipping the water with gusto.

"This, I fancy, is the place they call the tiger's *nullah*" (ravine), said Afzul. "I have heard them howling here myself while shooting in the jungle across on the other brow. It is useless to look for him here, if he has any regard for his skin. I'm tired, and I really don't see much fun in wearing ourselves out for that rotten old carrion of a usurer. We have got an antelope, which will be much more use to us, and I propose that we turn and go home."

"Yes, and if you had held your shot as I told you, we might have run down the bigger game by this time," grumbled Agha, testily. "Of course the noise would alarm him, and he would cower among the grass or scramble up a tree out of sight. But I will take my oath on the Koran that he is not far hence. We saw his marks clearly not a hundred yards back. I wish we had one of those dogs that the shepherds of the Safed-koh used to breed. I have seen one—half-wolf it was—that followed a foray from near Lughman more than a score of *koss* into the Bajour hills."

"But we have not such good noses," said Afzul, with a yawn. "It is rather the ears that your family is remarkable for, friend Agha. Heigho! I wonder what Radha is doing? What, in Shaitan's name, could have brought me out on this donkey's hunt to leave the dear one to pine alone for my absence?"

"Pity you did not bring her with you," sneered Agha. "Truss her on your back like a knapsack wherever you go for the next six weeks, and after that swear at her for being in your way if you happen by accident to look into the same room where she is. You remind me of Saleh Khan, a tropper of Walesby's Horse, who could scarcely tear himself away from his wife long enough to mount guard for the first fortnight; and afterwards he was so loath to go home to his hut in the lines, that he would sleep night after night in his horse's forestall, until the woman ran away with Kurrack Beg, the Moghal money-lender of Shubkudder, and 'the peace of the Prophet go with them,' said Saleh Khan."

"Dearest Radha," said Afzul, musingly, and unheeding the sarcasms of his comrade, "there is some pleasure in the thought of going home, now that your sweet face is waiting to welcome me. But, hearken!" he cried suddenly, springing to his feet. "By all the holy Imaums, do you hear that?"

As they rose to their feet, a hoarse, rough roar, not unlike a distant shock of broken thunder, and ending in a reverberating bellow, was heard up above them. The rocks and the trees took up the echo, and for a few seconds the whole place was filled with the appalling sound.

"A tiger!" said Afzul, in a low whisper; "by the tomb of the Prophet, if his lair be near us we shall have to fight for it. See that your gun is right, and stand by until the brute comes within shot."

All was silence for a few minutes, except that a couple of jackals, wakened by the roar, and deeming it prudent to change their quarters, started up from their bed in the long grass and scampered down the ravine. A great white owl, roused by a sound seldom heard but at the dead of night, came out of a tree above their heads, and after stupidly flopping about for a few minutes, went back to its nest, disgusted at such untimely disturbance.

The moment was a critical one, for Afzul had only a muzzle-loading rifle, and Agha a somewhat antiquated fowling-piece loaded with ball; but the two stood in fearless expectation, the old trooper waiting the result with the dogged, unflinching fatalism of a true Mussulman; and the young man, with all the boldness and enthusiasm of youth for adventure, burning to add to the list of his exploits the crowning glory of a hunter's life—the slaughter of a tiger in its own lair.

Again another bellow broke forth up above them, ending this time in an angry growl; and while they stood with hand on trigger, and guns ready to aim, a man appeared above them on the top of the rock. He stood for a second and looked wildly about him, and then began to let himself down the face of the cliff. A cleft in the upper part of the rock, in which some spiny brambles and broad spear-grass had taken root, assisted him to get down; and with hands bleeding and clothes torn, Three Shells—for it was he—let himself down. A shoe dropped from one of his feet as it beat the air, seeking in vain for a footing, and fell almost on Afzul's head. They could hear the groans and almost inarticulate exclamations which accompanied the painful descent; but though the money-lender paused often and looked down to the bottom of the ravine, his gaze was too wild and excited to notice the presence of men below him. He had eyes for only two things—for the tiger, which had not yet appeared above, and for the distance between him and the bottom with its rough jagged stumps and sharp-pointed stones.

At last his pursuer appeared. As the fierce animal paused for a minute on the crest of the cliff, he took in the whole situation at the first glance. He saw his quarry below him relax his hold in terror and drop helplessly downward on the little ledge midway up the rock, where he rolled himself into a knot, with hands up-raised in mute supplication for mercy, and eyes that seemed fascinated by those of his assailant. He saw down below him, also, the two hunters, and acknowledged their presence by an impatient switch of his tail, and a contemptuous sniff, as if he would intimate that *their* presence was not to deter him from the pursuit. Down he came, keeping his eyes fixed on Afzul and Agha the whole time, warily placing one foot past another down the steep descent: so calm and so cruel, so majestic and so relentless, the brute seemed to be an avenging deity incarnate in tiger form.

"Fire as he steps on the ledge," said Afzul in a hoarse whisper; "you will then have his breast broad towards you. I will aim between his eyes, if you do not turn him over."

As the tiger, still keeping his eyes steadily fixed on those beneath, stretched out his fore legs and let himself down on the ledge, Three Shells gave a yell of terror, and threw himself down the rock, still clinging, however, with his hands to the little platform, while he threw his legs wildly about in vain efforts to obtain a footing. At the same instant, Agha fired and struck the brute in the centre of the chest. The tiger gave a yell of pain, and spat defiance at the aggressors below, but still he would not yield his prey. Fixing his claws firmly in the rock, he stretched down his neck, and in another instant the wretched usurer's head would have been in his mouth, when Afzul's bullet struck him straight in the forehead. With a howl that made all the woods resound, the tiger threw himself over the cliff, and both bodies fell with a heavy dash upon the stones below. "Back! back! to a tree! to a tree for the sake of Allah!" shouted Agha, as he dragged his young master from the spot where man and beast were tossing together in a double death agony. They saw the tiger roll three times over; once the mahajan's body was in his mouth, and the last time his claws were convulsively buried in the victim's flesh; and then both were quiet and still, almost before the two Muhammadans could set their minds to realise what had taken place.

"Shabash!" cried Afzul, advancing with reloaded rifle to the place where the tiger lay, "that is more than ever my father did, with all his exploits. A king among tigers, Agha—a very rajah, by all the Imaums. Eversley Sahib himself never shot a bigger."

"A right good shot," said Agha, stirring the carcass with the barrel of his gun to see if any life remained in the brute. "I told you it would bring us good luck if we went out after that accursed *kaffir*. *Chee-chee!*" (exclamation of disgust), "how the brute has mangled the mahajan; see how his head is chewed as soft as a rotten mango, and his bowels torn out. Saves the hangman some bother, however."

"What is this?" said Afzul, taking up a thick bundle of papers and parchment. The whole find to myself, and what is over to my mother-in-law! By the Prophet! it is the title-deeds of the Ghatghar property which that rascal of a rajah has pledged to Three Shells. These may be useful some day. If we take the trouble to hunt down criminals for the Sircar" (Government), "it cannot grudge us their spoils."

"Certainly not," cried Agha, holding up the golden vase of the Linga, which he had picked up a good deal battered and dinted at the foot of the cliff; "and this shall be my portion. And I swear by the martyrs of Kerbela that I shall dedicate the whole value of this cup, except just so much as will pay for one drinking bout at Rutton Pal's, to the use and service of the blessed Pir Murtaza Ali, by whose holy intercession these great mercies have been vouchsafed to us. Ameen! ameen! We must bring men to-morrow and get the skin taken off; and now let us make for home, for we may meet some more cats of the same litter that will not be so easily tackled in the dark."

Next day the tiger was flayed, and the skin taken home to Walesbyganj, where it became a greater trophy in the eyes of the Subadar than even the sword which he wore in the Cabul war, or his Affghan medal; and the remains which the jackals had spared of Three Shells, the money-lender, were hustled out of the way with the point of a pole to wait for such funeral rites as wild beasts or the elements thought fit to confer upon him.

CHAPTER L.

THE NOTABLE MIRACLE OF THE LINGA.

It was weeks before the excitement springing out of these events died away in Dhupnagar, and every evening groups of villagers, assembled on the green before the temple porch, found something new to talk about in connection with them. The terrible fate of Three Shells was of course one of the most interesting topics; and it was not until Brijo Dutt, the *bhat* or bard of Bhutpore, made the story into a ballad, the moral of which roundly admonishes all oppressors of the poor, and exactors of exorbitant interest, that a similar punishment may be in store for them unless they mend their ways, that it ceased to be the stock subject of gossip. It was great consolation, however, for the villagers to think that their obligations to Three Shells had been cancelled by his flight and death, for when the authorities took formal possession of his dwelling, the only documents of value found were a few mortgages on houses and lands in Bhutpore and Gapshapganj. Gopi, the usurer's misshapen clerk, now set up for himself as a mahajan in the upper end of the village, and most of Three Shells' old clients went at once and raised a fresh loan upon the property which had been released by the old money-lender's death.

The village was filled at this time with the lamentations of Prosunno the lawyer, and Protap the accountant, who had been the bailsmen of Three Shells. When Mr Eversley heard that they had been connected with the usurer in most of his rogueries, and that they bore a bad character for unscrupulousness and oppression, he insisted on exacting the full amount of the penalty to which they had become liable; and only consented to reduce it by half on their agreeing to transfer their talents to some other part of the country. They now reside in the Lallkor district, where their professional attainments have secured them much success in the courts, that are under the able administration of Mr Muffington Prig.

It soon became known that Radha, Kristo Baboo's daughter, had been made a Muhammadan, and had been united in marriage to young Afzul Khan, the reverend custodian of the holy tail of Bhutpore officiating on the occasion. Of Kristo himself little was seen, but it was said that he was more tyrannical and exacting than ever with his tenants, and that he was in the habit of paying secret visits to Rutton Pal's spirit shop. He was firm in his intention to disown his daughter, and vowed that he would adopt the child of one of his poor kinsmen.

With regard to the temple, the villagers began to feel more and more every day that some decided step must be taken. There stood the temple, open to whoever chose to enter, and the Linga in its place unworshipped and unfed. Since Ramanath's death there had been no morning and evening offerings; no one had sought to bathe and anoint it; no rice or flowers had been laid before it; and the people of Dhupnagar began to anticipate evil consequences from the offence which the deity would naturally take at being thus neglected. The villagers appealed to Gangooly the headman, who in turn endeavoured to get Krishna to come to some resolution on the subject. If he would only consent to take up the priestly duties, Gangooly had urged, a man of his learning and virtue would draw all the corners of the earth to Dhupnagar, and the fame of the Linga would travel from Lanka to the Himalaya. Then Krishna had asked the headman to produce the instructions which his father had given him for the management of the temple; but as this was beyond Gangooly's power, the headman could only shrug his shoulders, and go back to the villagers.

Krishna's position with regard to the shrine of the Linga became more perplexing as it began to excite attention in a wider circle than that of Dhupnagar. The religious coteries in Calcutta soon turned their attention to the matter, and each endeavoured to influence Krishna to its own views. The 'Bengalee Baboo,' the orthodox organ, exhorted Baboo Krishna Chandra

Gossain to remember his duty to his family and his fellow-townsmen, and to make due provision for carrying on the worship of so well-established a centre of religion. "We would be the last party in the world," said the editor, "to seek to coerce the convictions of any one —we leave such tactics to our friends of the reforming faction, who have certainly most need to employ them; but we cannot help pointing out that Baboo Krishna Chandra Gossain ought to take a wider view of the question than that which his own personal belief might at first suggest. He ought to consider how deeply the religious feelings of his countrymen are bound up in the worship of the Linga, and he ought at least to respect, even if he cannot sympathise with, their prejudices." And in the end the editor hinted that if Krishna failed to do his duty, it would be necessary to inquire upon what footing the temple property was held, and to call upon the courts of justice to see that the revenues of the lands and houses which had been dedicated to the Linga were administered in accordance with the views of the donors.

On the other hand, the Theistic Reformers were eager that Krishna should at once boldly shut up the temple. "To a gentleman of Mr Gossain's culture and decision," wrote the 'Cossitollah Reflector,' "there can only be one course open. Let him boldly cast from him the cords of idolatry; let him shut up that sanctum of superstition which has ensnared so many misguided men. Ere many months are over, we trust to see a

Brahmist church, or at least a female school, set up in the spot which the votaries of superstition have made their high place. As for the Linga itself, we do not say that it might be advantageously employed, when broken down, in metalling the roads about Dhupnagar; but we shall gladly see it placed in the Asiatic Society's Museum, where it may some day interest succeeding generations as a relic of an extinct superstition." Then the 'Dharma Sabha,' the society which watches over the fortunes of Hindoo orthodoxy, felt called upon to interfere, and to stir up the villagers to vindicate their rights, promising them at the same time ample funds for trying the issue at law.

Krishna, however, was as little disposed to be dictated to by the Orthodox party as he was to be cajoled by the Theists. He remembered how both sides had abused him when he was in his sorest straits, and he vowed to himself that he would be made a tool of again by neither. It went to his heart to think of parting with his father's house, where he himself had been born, and with the fair lands round about Dhupnagar. He was beginning to experience a happiness in the love and society of his wife that he had never known before, and he looked forward with dismay to the breaking up of their comfort by removing from Dhupnagar to some other place where he would have to earn his bread. He had consulted with Mr Roy regarding the security of his tenure; and the lively lawyer was disposed to think that the courts would declare that the whole property belonged to the Linga,—Hurrinath Gossain, the founder of the temple, having dedicated the whole of his family property to the service of the idol. But, said Mr Roy, stick to possession, and they would make a stout fight for the defence.

But for this dread of ejectment which hung over Krishna's head, he would have been the happiest man in Bengal. He was comfortable and happy beyond measure in his domestic relations; the long pent-up affections of Chakwi were lavished without stint upon him; he had leisure to read his favourite books, and to dream beautiful dreams of regenerating the people around him, and converting Dhupnagar into an Arcadian Utopia. What things he would do for them if he were only sure that he was to spend the rest of his days among them! He would build schools, endow a dispensary, establish lectures, and teach the people all that he knew himself; he would be a model landlord, and keep his tenants out of the clutches of the money-lender. In fact, there was no end to the reforms that he would bring about—only there was that black Linga in the way—an eyesore to him every time he crossed the compound.

"Become priest yourself," urged practical Chakwi; "and if you do not like to do *puja*" (worship) "yourself, hire a Brahmin to do the service for you."

"You silly Chakwi," said her husband, "don't you see that all the eyes of the country are on us, and that to give in to one side would draw on us the abuse of the other. Besides, not for all the land on the Gungaputra, from its source to its mouth, would I give a pie either directly or indirectly to encourage idolatry. But that my father had some regard for it, I feel inclined to smash the Linga every time that I see it."

Deliverance from his difficulties was, however, provided in a way that Krishna had least expected. He had gone to Calcutta on a visit with his wife and stepmother, partly to consult Mr Roy concerning the legal proceedings with which he was threatened, and partly that he might give himself the pleasure of showing Chakwi the wonders of that great city, with its marvellous railways and steamboats and carriages. While there his attention was attracted by the following paragraph in an issue of the *Shome Prokash* :—

"NOTABLE MIRACLE AT DHUPNAGAR.—A correspondent writes us from the Gungaputra valley, informing us of a remarkable occurrence which has taken place in the village of Dhupnagar. The well-known Linga in the Temple there has disappeared, and the villagers aver that it was carried off by the god Siva himself on the night of the new moon. Since the death of the late worthy priest Ramanath Gossain, the Linga has been neglected, the son being of those who follow after the new teaching. On the said night Modhoo Churn Bhur, the porter of the Temple, a reputable and truth-telling man, states that, hearing a noise in the Temple shrine about midnight, he went inside, thinking it might be thieves, and saw a surprising sight. Before the shrine stood the great god Siva, whom Modhoo knew by his tiger-skin raiment, holding a mighty club in his hand. Brightness seemed to encircle his head, and his face was as the face of a man distorted with passion. He stretched out his club and struck the porter to the earth, and when he recovered his consciousness, both god and idol had disappeared. What shall we say of this? It is not for us to declare what such wonders may portend. All that we can do is to tell the facts as they are told to us."

But other papers were less cautious, and most of the orthodox vernacular journals were quite convinced that this great miracle was designed to show the world that the gods would not put up with the spread of heresy and the growing impiety of the age. Additional testimony to that of Modhoo as to the celestial visit to Dhupnagar was soon also forthcoming. Gangooly the headman had seen a flash of light, which he thought at first a falling star, dart from behind the peaks of Panch Pahar, and disappear over the Temple, about an hour before the miracle. Dwarkanath the schoolmaster had heard soft music the same night, which was never made, he felt certain, by any earthly instrument. Shama Churn the grain-dealer had seen a stranger, of stately mien beyond that of mortals, walking on the village green that evening; and Nitye, the *kobiraj*, deponed that he had been out late and seen a huge black body flying swiftly through the air, which he then thought was a devil, but which he was now certain was Siva flying away with the Linga. And other evidence in abundance was speedily forthcoming; for not to have seen something connected with this notable miracle was to confess yourself a person of no estimation in Dhupnagar society.

Krishna knew not what to make of this story; but at all events his chief source of perplexity, the Linga, was gone. "Accept the story they tell you," advised Mr Roy, "and tell them that when the gods return the Linga, you will give its claims to the property full consideration. In the mean time you may safely consider yourself its nearest heir, and the magistrate will readily recognise your title."

And thus the controversy ended; for as the Orthodox party admitted the miracle, they could not give any effect to their suspicion that Krishna had put the idol out of the way. And so the priest's son entered into undisturbed possession of his ancestral lands. Some years after, a story got abroad in Dhupnagar regarding this miracle, which ought to be narrated here, but which never received any credit. Agha, the trooper, drinking at Rutton Pal's one evening with some discharged soldiers of his own faith who were journeying home to their villages, told his comrades of a trick which he had played upon the infidels of the place—might the wrath of Allah be made manifest upon them! He had, he alleged, disguised himself in a tiger skin and painted face, and entered the idol temple, knocked down the porter, and carried off the black stone to which the dogs did *puja* (worshipped), and had flung it into a deep pool in the Gungaputra. Rutton Pal overheard this, and told the townsmen; but they knew better. It was all Mussulman brag and lying. If ever there was an authenticated miracle on record, it was the disappearance of the Linga. And while the miracle was yet fresh, more pilgrims came to Dhupnagar to see the spot than ever had been counted while the Linga was there; and Modhoo the porter got so many fees for telling the story and showing the place, that at times he has been known to manifest brief symptoms of cheerfulness and geniality.

Shamsuddeen Khan, the old Subadar, still lives at an advanced age. His son has settled down with marriage, keeps regular hours, has forsaken Rutton Pal's, and abjured those drinks which the Prophet has seen good to forbid to his followers. His beautiful wife has proved a most affectionate partner and judicious counsellor, and has done what a noble and tender woman can do to make her father-in-law happy and comfortable. That she still felt the ban under which she had been placed by her own father and people to be a grievous sorrow there can be little doubt; but it only manifested itself as a chastening and softening influence, developing in her qualities to which she had before been a stranger. Her children united the high spirit and courage of their father with the beauty of their mother. Agha nursed them as he had nursed their father, and the only care of the Subadar's life was lest the Khyberee might lead them into mischief; and seldom a day passed over without a threat that the trooper would be sent back to the hills. He taught the boys to ride almost as soon as their little legs could straddle across a saddle, and began them to fence when as yet they could scarcely stand firm on their own feet. One day, while little Shamsuddeen from the back of his pony was chastising a boy in the bazaar who had displeased him, a big fat man came up to him, and laying his hand on the child's head had said, "Sri-Krishna-ji! a right Lahory spirit. Heaven bless the child!" and Radha's heart rejoiced when the story was told her, for she knew that her father had blessed her son.

In course of time, when the Rajah of Ghatghar had brought himself to an untimely grave, Afzul Khan stepped in and claimed the property, as holding the title-deeds for a heavy mortgage; and though Baboo Preonath Doss, the late Dipty, who had accepted Mr Eversley's alternative to resign the service, or to submit to an official inquiry into his conduct in connection with the conspiracy against Afzul Khan, endeavoured to excite the Rajah's kinsfolk to contest the claim, the Ghatghar people were willing to accept the liberal allowances which Afzul offered, and he was quietly allowed to take possession of the estate. The Dipty then attempted to raise an outcry that Afzul had stolen the titles at the time when Three Shells ran away; but as none of the Rajah's relations cared to countenance his proceedings, he soon after left the district in disgust, taking with him all the money that his late father, Ram Lall the oilman, had made, and leaving his old mother nothing but the shop to support herself. Afzul made an excellent landlord, and soon cleared away the heavy burdens on the Ghatghar property; and a recent issue of the 'Bengalee Baboo' held him up as an example for Bengal landlords to imitate. He is now as prudent and thrifty as he was formerly reckless and improvident; and as he stands high in the favour of Government, it is anticipated that a seat in the Bengal Legislative Council will be offered him on an early occasion.

The only change that has come over Agha is a somewhat ostentatious profession of piety, the effect of which is, however, somewhat marred by the frequent visits which he still continues to pay to Rutton Pal's spirit shop. He has given four silver lamps to the shrine of Pir Murtaza Ali, to which he is often a pilgrim; and he has been at the expense of gilding the case containing the holy tail of Bhutpore—all out of the proceeds of Three Shells' famous *lota.* At both shrines he is held in high estimation, and his liberality is cited as an encouragement to all true believers. In other respects he grumbles as much as ever, is quite as quarrelsome, and as ready for any mischief that may arise as any young desperado of two-and-twenty.

And what shall we say of Krishna and Chakwi? Only this, that we need not wish our dear readers any greater felicity than they enjoy in themselves and in their children. And all Krishna's golden dreams of ambition, of the regeneration of his countrymen, of flooding India with "sweetness, culture, and light?" gone, alas! where so many of our early aspirations go. He is no model landlord, like Afzul Khan, though he may be a kinder one to the backward tenant. He has done nothing as yet for the improvement of Dhupnagar, and he blames the conservatism of old Gangooly, the headman, for obstructing his good intentions. He is still unsettled in his religious convictions, but more inclined than before to the society of the Christian *padrees,* whose frequent presence about the house, good, active, practical Chakwi is inclined to view with suspicion. The poor never pass his gate unfilled, nor is his ear ever turned away from the tale of distress. He shuns the wrangling of the creeds and the battles of the Calcutta sophists as much as he once courted them; and laughingly evades all attempts to drag him into religious controversy. "There is no creed so bad," he always says, "but it may serve to comfort some poor soul; and before you root out a plant you should always make sure that there is sufficient soil left to nurture another."

Chakwi has only one secret from her husband, which she will carry to the grave with her. She is fully convinced that she owes her husband's affection to a love-philtre; and it is well for the happiness of both her and him that the true issue of this effort has been mercifully concealed from their ken.

THE END.

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